

2

Min-Maxing
My **TRPG**
Build in
Another
World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

Author

Schuld

Illustrator

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The Henderson Scale

- 9: Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.
- 1: The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.
- 0: For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.
- 0.5: A tangent impacts the main story.
E.g. The party misses an event introducing them to the main plot. Alternatively, one of the PCs reinterprets the scene to mean something completely different.
- 0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. Everyone gets so invested in an introductory scene that the goal of the whole adventure shifts.
- 1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "You guys get that this scrawny quest-giver is asking you to find him the materials he needs to make his wedding ring, right? Why on Earth would you think to train him until he can do it himself? What's that? 'It's more dramatic that way?' Have any of you *read* the damn handout?"
- 1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "A +5 bonus to Strength should be enough to win any normal woman's heart," you say. I seem to remember telling you that the girl wanted a tear from the Goddess of Springwater. Anyone else remember that?"
- 1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "Okay, look. I can see why you might be upset that your admittedly muscular friend got turned down after training to be stronger than the average adventurer. But that's no excuse to start infighting over whether you should kidnap the girl or try to break her heart."
- 1.75: The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "The fact that we have someone claiming to be a sub-GM to help me handle the NPCs is proof of how engaged you are with my campaign, and I think that's great—no, really. Still, I can't help but wonder why you've chosen to *fight your way into a nobleman's house*."
- 2.0: The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.
- Over: The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
E.g. "Your sworn friend and the nobleman come to respect each other after a good old fashioned fistfight, and your buddy marries the noble's sister so they can all live happily ever after. You're telling me I have to trash this whole campaign I wrote and sign off on yours? Are you kidding me?"

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One Full Henderson Ver0.2



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Munchkin

1: A childish player who throws fits to try and gain every advantage they can for their PC.

2: A player who prefers to enjoy the act of building up a strong character over fleshing out their place in the world. These players staunchly uphold the rules on their quest for invincibility. Also known as a Japanese munchkin.



Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rulebooks and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres that include fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

After overcoming what I'd thought to be an insurmountable pit of despair with all the ado of taking a step up a flight of stairs, the woman approached my sister and me. Everything about her—the silvery bun in her hair, the contrast between her deep blue and light jade heterochromic irises, the way her facial features were perfectly set in tune with the golden ratio—gave off an air of artistry; in fact, she was stunning to the point of artificiality.

Further, her dignified attire was beyond anything that I'd ever seen. The setting sun shimmered off her robe where the deep crimson fabric peeked out from underneath intricate patterns of maroon embroidery.

Yet what drew my eyes like no other were her pointed ears poking out from the gaps in her chignon: they were proof that she was not a mensch, but a *methuselah*. She and her kind were remarkably similar to a race popular in Western and Eastern fantasy alike, perhaps most famous for their appearance in Tolkien's works—the elves.

They had no natural lifespan (or perhaps it was simply too long to comprehend), were impervious to disease, mastered magic without any physiological drawbacks, and continued about their lives forever unless they were murdered outright. As walking amalgamations of all that man envies, methuselah and elves were quite analogous.

They came out of the womb with a disposition for magic and abandoned the phenomenon of aging once they came into their physical prime. This, combined with their freedom from the woes of

illness, put them at the top of all the humanfolk races as the perfect organism.

When I'd first read of their existence in the church's library, all I could wonder was, *Are they cheating?* Now that I'd seen one such specimen for myself, the same doubt played back in my mind.

"Now, would you mind telling me your story?"

Her fingers snapped once more. The first instance had erased the dark sphere that had spelled my end, and the second did the same to the spellcaster himself. A mere flick of the wrist sufficed to disappear what had been an insurmountable threat to me.

I couldn't tell whether he'd been teleported to some faraway land or literally winked out of existence. All I knew was that the woman before me was a mage of unthinkable power.

The silver-haired magician pushed up the monocle on her verdant left eye and gave us—or more precisely, she gave *Elisa*—a curious stare, as if she were a researcher observing germs in a petri dish.

"Where in the world did you get your hands on that changeling?"

"Change...ling?" I had no idea what she was saying. Elisa was my sister. You couldn't deny that fact.

Furthermore, both my parents were mensch, born and raised here in Konigstuhl canton. Two mensch could only birth another mensch. It wasn't as if their offspring would suddenly mutate into a whole different species.

"Quite a rare sight to see such a developed specimen," she went on. "Did you have some particular use for it in mind that necessitated its growth?"

I'd been too young to remember Elisa's birth, but that didn't change the fact that I'd been with her all her life. What was more, all my siblings and I had been delivered by church midwives at our own home, as was customary for the time. There wasn't another baby Elisa could have been changed *for*.

"I've spent a fair amount of time in this land, yet it truly has been some time since I last saw one. You seemed to be in the middle of something here—perhaps a dispute over your subject here? Considering how attached to you it seems, I take it this one was born to your own family?"

Above all else, Elisa was a miniature version of our mother. We both inherited her golden hair and our father's blue eyes. When our whole family lined up together, who could possibly mistake us for anything but kin?

"The fuck you tryna call my sister 'it' for, you long-eared, gabby bitch?!"

At any rate, my line of reasoning was beside the point. I merely had a bone to pick with the mage: what was her deal with treating our

adorable little girl like a bug under glass? In part due to the rush of my recent battle, I'd grown so heated that I completely forgot that she had saved our lives just moments prior.

Foul insults—rural slang that I'd never once uttered before—spewed forth. The palatial speech that I'd worked into my muscle memory since the day I'd first learned it evaporated amidst my boiling rage.

Suddenly I heard a popping sound somewhere. My vision went dark and my legs gave out.

“Oh my.”

“Mr. Brother?!”

As I sank into darkness, I felt something peculiarly soft catch my limp form. The scent of may bells drifted into my bloody nose and tickled my senses. My consciousness faded away with only the sound of Elisa's cries echoing in my mind.

[Tips] Methuselah are a supreme humanfolk race whose glory days never wane. Gifted in both body and magic, there are only two things that can end them: overwhelming violence to ruin the flesh and the muddy torrent of time to chip at the psyche. As a result, methuselah are subject to eternal confinement in a water prison in the event of high crime.

Even during the liveliest of canton festivals, Lambert never allowed himself to truly get drunk. This stemmed partly from his obligation to the populace but mainly from his long years at the front lines of battle. Those experiences had robbed him of the deeper pleasures liquor could provide. No amount of booze could file away that last remnant of vigilance in the back of his mind, even surrounded by the peaceful merriment of the town square.

Thus, when Margit, the local huntsman's daughter, stormed into the square in a state of shock, he was ready to act while those around him were too plastered to stand. The words “kidnappers,” “woods,” and “outskirts” were spat out between heaving gasps; that was enough for the Watch captain to toss aside his mug and start moving.

Lambert bolted to his home (he alone out of all the watchmen had received a proper house from the magistrate) to grab his equipment. With no time to fully gear up, he slipped on a single layer of chain mail and jammed his hands into a pair of gloves before picking up the trusty blade that had accompanied him in so many battles. Ready for combat, he literally burst through his front door only to bump into an unexpected visitor.

“What is it, Johannes?” Lambert asked. His guest was a local farmer who'd been enjoying a drink at the festival only moments

prior.

“I need a weapon! Please, lend me one!” Johannes had also received word from Margit and rushed over as fast as he could; after all, the kidnapped girl was his only daughter, and his youngest son was the one buying time to save her.

Faced with new information, the captain of the Watch hesitated for a few moments before heading back inside and grabbing an extra spear. Had it been any other man, Lambert would have ordered him to stand down. However, the career warrior knew that Johannes too had been abandoned by the cradle of true drunkenness, and figured he had the right to fight for his children.

The two of them struck out toward the spot in question with weapons in hand only to stumble across a startling scene. There were broken boxes and splintered barrels all around the demolished campsite, with as many scattered wares as there were maimed men.

In the center of all the carnage, Elisa sat bawling her eyes out while clinging to her collapsed brother. A single methuselah stood next to the two children at a complete loss.

“Oh, might you be their parent?” she asked, after a brief, suffocating pause.

The two men were even more bewildered than the mage, and exchanged gormless looks in hopeless pursuit of some kind of answer. Still, they could tell the situation was dire and required quick action; a flick of the eyes was enough for them to decide that Johannes would speak for them, since his children were the ones present.

“Excuse me, may I ask from which noble house you hail?” he asked politely. “I am the father to those two. If it would suit you, I’d like to know what exactly occurred here.”

Regardless of the situation, he could tell the methuselah was no commoner. The exquisite embroidery that spanned the surface of her crimson robe was plainly extravagant, and Johannes doubted that all of his material belongings would even trade for a single sleeve. Her carefully braided hair was kept in place with accessories of similar make, and nobody short of an aristocrat would wear a monocle like hers.

Most pertinent of all was her speech: the pronunciation of her first word had been evidence enough of a lifetime of blue-blooded upbringing. The feminine variant of the palatial tongue that she spoke in was reserved for the elite among the elite. Johannes was absolutely certain that she was a patrician so far above him that just to look at her from afar was already an unlikely event.

“I can hardly claim the dignity of a noble house,” she answered casually. “I am a magus hailing from the Trialist Empire of Rhine’s Imperial College of Magic. My allegiance lies with the Leizniz cadre,

the School of Daybreak—my name, Agrippina du Stahl.”

Although Agrippina’s introduction had been exceedingly lax in tone, the two commoners dropped their weapons and took a knee the instant they heard the word “du.” Any self-respecting citizen knew the absolute authority that came with a nobiliary particle, and that was all the more true of the “du” and “des” that embellished the names of the privileged upper class from one of Rhine’s few true competitor states—the Kingdom of Seine.

The lives of the imperial populace were certainly not taken lightly (especially in contrast to Medieval Satsuma, wherein a signed slip of paper was enough to cut down a lowly squire), but there was no guarantee of safety if one drew the ire of a noble. The situation was already convoluted, and Johannes had arrived armed to challenge her identity without so much as kneeling. If she were to point out his transgression, his life would be over.

However, Agrippina merely looked distraught at the sight of his crying daughter and fallen son, grumbling that *she* wanted to know what had happened too. After scratching her head in frustration, she took a long puff of her pipe to reset herself.

“In the meantime,” she said, “may I ask for some tea and a seat indoors?”

Both Lambert and Johannes froze for a moment, but immediately sprang to their feet once their minds had processed what she’d said. The former went to the village chief’s residence to prepare their most fitting hospitality; the latter scooped up his children and showed the noblewoman the way.

[Tips] The village chief is a local government official who is entrusted with a town by the magistrate. These trusted retainers are allowed a family name, and supervise the day-to-day happenings of small villages in place of their superior. They lead the townspeople in times of trouble and collect taxes come harvest season.

Spring of the Twelfth Year (I)

Handout

Information given by the GM to the players that is needed to begin play. By laying the general groundwork for the story and characters, handouts give campaigns some direction. While some handouts prefer to neatly set the tone of a session, others offer only loose descriptions—either way, there will always be people who completely ignore them.

In the West, handouts are more often thematic tools used to immerse the players in the world they explore.

My eyes shot open when my nose was assaulted by a strange tartness.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

I looked around in shock to see the methuselah standing at my bedside (or rather, whoever’s bedside this was) with medicine in hand. She looked tired as she shut away the vial and lazily asked me about my condition.

Slowly and cautiously, I sat up, only to find the tear-inducing pain that had beset my flesh had all but vanished. A handful of my teeth were broken or missing, but luckily they were all baby teeth that would be replaced sooner or later. I would have lost all hope had they been part of my permanent set.

All that lingered was the dull weight of an exhausted body. Bluntly put, I should have had a broken bone or three, and the total absence of pain was unsettling in its own right.

“Where...?” I glanced around, mumbling to myself in confusion until I recognized the village chief’s abode. It wasn’t exactly a difficult conclusion to come to, as he was the only person in town with a guest bedroom this well maintained.

As I watched the woman sit in a chair next to the bed looking as weary as could be, it finally hit me: I’d passed out from sheer rage.

“Does anything hurt?” she asked.

“No, not particularly,” I said courteously.

“Well, how nice to hear. I’m not so well versed in manipulating tissue and bone, you see... Ah, and fear not, it hasn’t been so long since you collapsed. The sun has just about set, but no more.”

The silver-haired mage put away some more vials as she casually

glossed over matters well within the realm of body horror. She snapped her fingers and pulled a snuff box from thin air. Adorned with mother-of-pearl, the white piece of lacquerware contained minced tobacco and an ashtray; it was clearly priceless. The golden mouthpiece and decorated bowl of the pipe she retrieved from it were indicative of equal value, and it alone could probably buy my house several times over.

Wait, who exactly is this lady that I cursed out?

“Now then, from where shall I begin?” she said.

Despite her aura of tedium, her hands’ movements were dainty as she packed her pipe. She put it to her lips without bothering to light a flame, but much to my surprise, she blew out a slender stream of smoke moments later. Apparently, fire didn’t even require a snap.

“Ordinarily, it would be quite strange for me to be the one explaining this to you, but your parents seemed unable to grasp the finer details, so I couldn’t leave it to them.”

“I...see?” I said.

I felt as though my fit from before had crossed the line and kept going, but she seemed not to mind. It was clear that she looked down on me (this was such a given that it didn’t bother me at all), but I couldn’t grasp why she was bothering to give me an explanation.

“Rather, *you* are the most peculiar one of them all. How in the world have you not noticed yet?”

I tilted my head as her question sailed clear over it, only for her to mirror my gesture.

“You mean to say you have *this much* capacity for magic, and your eyes remain closed? This must be some sort of joke,” she said, peering into me like a jarred specimen. If nothing else, her words and actions made it clear she had no interest in me as a person. “Have you never felt a wave of mana disturb your body? Have you never been overwhelmed by sudden impulses or assaulted by unbearable headaches?”

“No, never,” I answered.

“How strange...” she mused. From the way she turned away to exhale her smoke (which had a pleasant sweetness to it), it appeared she had some scrap of respect for me. Still, something about her cold gaze bothered me: the blue and green eyes pointed my way weren’t looking at a human being.

So this is why people dislike methuselah. The books I’d read said only that they “weren’t well received by others”—a phrase coated in more than a few layers of sugar. I’d suspected it stemmed from the arrogance of a long-lived individual, but...I could hardly imagine a sentient being able to endure this kind of scrutiny.

“Normally, someone with your aptitude for the craft should have

some level of cognition as a mage.”

Truthfully, I’d begun raising the fundamental stats of both Mana Capacity and Mana Output in the vague hope that I might one day be able to use magic, and I’d ridden the momentum of that hope all the way to V: Good. However, my distaste for the uncertainty that came with self-study in spellcasting had left me unwilling to take the plunge on a skill that would have awoken my powers.

In some ways, this was my power’s greatest flaw. Generally speaking, skills that I “should have” obtained weren’t automatically given to me; all I received was the notification that I *could* do so myself with my hard-earned experience if I chose to. This weakness was why I still had yet to grasp magic despite having the disposition for it.

Not that I had any objections, of course. My power’s greatest strength lay on the other side of the coin: where normal people unwittingly wasted resources acquiring worthless skills and traits, I could elect to avoid them. The Vice category was full of pointless talents like Shifty Imagination and Petty Theft, and the fact that I would never have my experience taken by things of that nature meant my growth would be far more efficient than my peers.

Still, my mana-related stats were meant to be marginally above average, so I wasn’t sure why the mage seemed so surprised. Maybe it was because most *mensch* were so lacking that my Good status put me in the upper echelons of my people. I’d been working under the assumption that my Mana Capacity and Output were Good for a humanfolk, but I could see how I drew attention if it instead meant I was Good as a mage.

Although this was all my own conjecture, the world was full of intricate little mysteries, and my desire for a proper splatbook to explain all the details swelled up.

“Well, I suppose I’ll just think of you as a peculiarity and leave it at that,” she said, smacking her pipe on the snuff box to empty the ash. The mage packed another dose of dried leaves with a wicked grin. She may have been the spitting image of the sagacious elves whose wisdom never waned even in the face of the abyss, but her showy smile drove home the point that a fatal difference stood between her and the fantasy literature of my former world.

“Allow me to unearth the *truth*.”

Another passage from the book I’d once read came to mind as I recalled the major distinction between elves and methuselah: unlike the nature-loving elves who valued health and temperance, the mage and her flock were the progeny of civilization.

The methuselah erected lofty monuments out of reach of the filthy mitts of ignorance, and the by-product of their thirst for knowledge

was the sophisticated culture they drowned in. They were city slickers who favored chiseled stone to wood; their magnificent feasts were but one of the ways they indulged in the new and exciting as they sought out the cutting edge of taste. In an attempt to soothe the terrible fatigue of eternal life, each and every one of them had given in to hedonism and had a penchant for loose spending as they immersed themselves in entertainment and study.

As a result, they held great influence, despite being far outnumbered by *us mensch*. Of the seven electorate houses that crowned Rhine's emperors, two were headed by methuselah.

"To repeat myself, your younger sister is not a *mensch*."

I could feel the blood rush to my head again as I opened my mouth, but her snow-white finger came up to my lips before I could speak. I obediently zipped up, to which she chuckled out her nose, satisfied that I seemed to have *some* manners.

"Your sister is a changeling."

What did she just say? A changeling? Our adorable Elisa? The news was as difficult to accept as it was to believe. Myths of changelings had been passed down in the English tradition of my past world: the tales featured fairies spiriting away babies and replacing them with their own kin out of either hatred, amusement, or desire for a human child. Time and time again, these tales ended in tragedy, and some historians speculated that they were used in ancient times to explain disabled children.

However, the stories had a different flair in this world—fairies were verifiably real, after all. The coin that my brothers and I had hunted in our youth had been more than just an old man's babbling.

Fairies were metaphysical entities altogether different from the humanfolk, demonfolk, and demihumans that dotted the land. They were sentient phenomena, invisible to most.

The only ones who could perceive them were mages with mystic eyes and young children, whose undeveloped egos blurred the boundaries of what is and isn't. The gift was further restricted to a handful of races, according to what I'd read.

"You see, fairies may at times be born into the world with physical form by borrowing the womb of another living being."

Hey, that wasn't written in the book!

"Enamored by happy households," she went on, "their souls wish for a body, and their desire manifests when they become a changeling. I can guarantee you my account is authentic; it comes from a—shall we say—*primary source*."

I couldn't process what she was saying. *You're telling me Elisa—the girl I've looked after for seven years—isn't a mensch?*

"Unfortunately, the process is quite taxing. Young changelings

often grow slowly, are plagued with a weak constitution, or are otherwise too dysfunctional to survive more than a few years.”

That hit closer to home than I would’ve liked: this was the very reason Elisa was so attached to me. I vividly remembered how we’d all take turns nursing her and buying medicine every time she fell ill, and she was undeniably childish for her age.

“Lastly, fairies favor blonde hair and blue eyes... Do you understand what I mean to say?”

Of course I did. My mother Hanna and I were exhibits A and B.

“The girl is a changeling,” she concluded. “I dare to say that she’ll soon awaken to her talents, as well. As the fog of toddlerhood clears from her mind, her budding ego will rouse the powers of her birthright.”

I knew all too well that she was right, and for the mage to explain all this so candidly, she must have already been certain of her claim. Her actions were far beyond that of a woman stringing a child along to satisfy her boredom.

Besides, I’d experienced Elisa’s inexplicable power firsthand. I’d wondered why the radiant heat death of the first mage’s spell had vanished—it seemed unlikely that he’d slipped up. From my novice perspective, I doubted the spell would have fizzled out like it had never existed in the first place had it been a simple failure.

The methuselah had done something similar with the dismal black sphere, and both times, the kidnapper had been caught off guard by his dissipating mana—not in the way of someone surprised by their own error, but as if to question why his spell had failed in the first place.

The logical conclusion was to think that someone else had erased it. What was more, I had clearly heard Elisa scream my name, wringing every last bit of sound out of her vocal cords...and the light winked out of existence at the same moment.

I hadn’t been saved by coincidence or an enemy blunder, but by Elisa. The gears were beginning to turn behind the scenes. Something big threatened to upend life as we knew it. But even then...

“And?” I said. “What of it?”

Even then, family is not heritage alone. The ties of kinship are found in mutual love and acceptance; although blood is where family begins, it is certainly not where it ends. Whether Elisa was a changeling or a goblin had no bearing on the link between us.

Dumbfounded at my statement, the methuselah stared at me in astonishment. She shook her head as if to chase out an uncomfortable emotion and asked, “Am I misremembering? Do mensch have some sort of culture of fostering other races?”

“This has nothing to do with fostering anything. This is a matter

of bonds,” I said, causing the woman to sigh in exasperation. “Did my parents say the same thing?”

My confident tone got a raised eyebrow out of the mage. If nothing else, I at least managed to catch her off guard. I’d been asleep for a few hours, and my parents had already been given an explanation much like the one I was receiving now. She’d said she’d given up on speaking to them, and I could imagine why. We were out in the boonies; the cultured idea of mundanity she expected was so foreign to my parents that they’d probably had a difficult time understanding her.

That was why she was here, pushing through the tedium of explaining the situation to me directly. I wasn’t sure what she intended by trying to rope me in, but one thing was unmistakably clear: my parents had no desire to give up their daughter. The years of hardship and love that it took to raise her remained steadfast despite the uncovered mysteries of her birth. Perhaps we would have wavered had the news come right after she’d been born, but our ties were buried under the tightly packed sands of time.

“It’s quite aggravating to see how sure of yourself you are,” she said. “An excess of wit is detrimental to success, you know?”

“It is not my intent to be witty, madam. I only speak on behalf of the faith I place in our bond.”

“Your bond, is it?” she mused quietly.

I recalled that methuselah were rigid individualists who would casually go a quarter of a century without so much as a letter to their parents after leaving the nest. Those who didn’t care for their noble title went as far as to omit their family name during introductions.

“I imagine she would have been chased down in my homeland,” she said. “The difference between two nations truly is a world apart.”

As I’d suspected, she wasn’t from around these parts, which left her perplexed at the disparity in home values. I thought it would have been obvious that different countries would have different familial structures; there was already a huge gap between the households of the city and countryside. For her not to understand that, this lady either had no interest or no experience with the subtleties of human relations.

“Well, enough of bonds and what have you. It isn’t as if that has any effect on the law.”

“The law?” I asked.

“Quite. I trust that you understand that your younger sister is a changeling by this point?” Once confirming that I understood, she began to slowly enunciate every word as if she were trying to teach a blithering idiot. “Changelings stumble into their great magical gift as their minds begin to solidify. Their powers are so great, in fact, that

they verge on being dangerous.”

I didn’t need her pedantry to understand that after seeing Elisa delete a massive ball of energy on the scale that she did. It didn’t take much thought to guess what could happen once both her body and mana reserves matured.

The state would never allow a naturally occurring threat to security to remain unsupervised. As the symbol of national loyalty and the collector of taxes, the government would take action to prevent her from hurting anybody.

“In the worst case, I’m sure she would be capable enough of cleaning a small canton off of the map without a trace, judging by how impressive her Mana Capacity already is. I surmise she originates from a remarkably superior fairy. Perhaps this little home of yours was worthy of equally remarkable envy...”

The mage trailed off and began pondering with her chin in hand. I took advantage of the lull to ask what was going to happen to Elisa, since that was all that really mattered. *In the worst case...*

“Put a lid on that ill will of yours,” she said. “I shan’t treat her poorly.”

Shoot, I gave myself away. I’d begun preparing a fallback plan to...*tidy up the situation* and take Elisa into hiding, if I had to.

“Fret not, I’ll speak on her behalf. It isn’t as if I can lie when it comes to sorcery—we magia have a lot of rules.”

She laughed about how any attempt to misrepresent the truth of anything magical might end with her head flying, but I was too caught up in her unusual title to notice. *What the heck is a “magia”?*

“That being said, dangerous mystic beings are tightly controlled by the government.”

That seemed justifiable, but I still didn’t want to accept it. Our family’s precious angel wouldn’t burn down cities like her Old Testament counterparts; her most cherubic quality was that she was the cutest girl in the whole wide world—and no, the court will hear no objections. But I accepted that leaving her to her own devices was risky. For her to lose control and accidentally hurt those she loved was the last thing I wanted to see.

“Should the state be left in charge of her,” she continued, “I suspect she’d be treated as the object of study. I’m sure there would be plenty of researchers dying to get their hands on a specimen as long-lived as her.”

I felt every pore on my body scream at the mention of the word “specimen.” It suggested that she’d be *used* like some sorcerous reagent in any number of horrid experiments. The depths of magic were profound, and inhumane experiments were but a means to a greater end. As a matter of fact, in an era where life was not

considered so irreplaceable, anything not explicitly forbidden by the law was sure to be fair game.

Even in the history I knew, criminals, foreign captives, and slaves had been used for all sorts of unimaginable scientific trials. The tale was so common that to unpack every awful example was an exercise in futility.

“In the best case,” the mage elaborated, “she’d be cut up right away and sent off to be used as a research sample. However, in the worst case, who’s to say how miserable—”

“There’s no need for threats,” I said. “There must be something you want for someone of your stature to be here speaking to someone of mine.”

Her vague intimidation was pointless; I was already willing to give her anything I possibly could. And it was clear that if she didn’t need anything from me, she wouldn’t have wasted her time speaking to a literal child in the first place.

I would do anything to secure a safe, happy future for Elisa. If the mage asked for a limb or an organ of mine, I would personally carve it out and package it for her. I swore on my name as a brother to protect Elisa, and I wouldn’t turn back on my word now.

“Splendid. I rather appreciate your shrewdness, you know? Anyhow, to run through the interesting bits, changelings are only dangerous due to the instability that comes from their poor control of magecraft.”

“Which means...” I said in realization.

“Quite. So long as they learn to manipulate their mana, they render themselves harmless. The empire is not so intolerant as to mistreat a harmless sentient being that once thought of themselves as an imperial citizen.”

A shining ray of hope cut through the dark despair. It was common in fiction for those outside the bounds of humanity to be treated like pariahs and used for cruel experiments regardless of how little threat they posed, and the empire’s compassionate stance was heart melting.

However, a question remained: how was she meant to master her powers? It wasn’t as if she could study on her own and then claim, “See, all safe!” We wouldn’t be able to guarantee her or anyone else’s safety.

“I shall take your sister as my apprentice,” the mage announced. “I shall raise her into a full-fledged magus. Without any worry of her accidentally exploding, her rights as a citizen will be restored and she’ll be free to live a proper life.”

“That sounds wonderful, but...”

“Right, I’m sure you’re wondering about my compensation.

Truthfully, I don't care for such things."

She doesn't need any compensation? This methuselah sure says some heroic things. Still, I couldn't help but wish that she'd put a little more effort into her presentation if she planned to deliver such a gallant line. Her antithetical disinterest and smoldering pipe left a dubious aftertaste.

To begin with, everything else she'd said up until this point made it easy to see that she wasn't the type of person to shoulder a burdensome task out of the goodness of her heart. My prediction was closer to prophecy than guesswork, and I was convinced she had some heinous plot up her sleeve.

"Frankly, I have no trouble and don't ever intend to have trouble when it comes to money. Besides, I would outright *pay* to be done with this boorish fieldwork."

I hoped that I would one day be able to utter such a line. We weren't particularly poor, but life in the fields didn't exactly rake in giant piles of gold. *Wait, what did she say? Fieldwork?*

"Nevertheless, I can't simply pick up an apprentice at my leisure. Magia aren't fond of unchecked proliferation of their arts, so I must charge a tuition to take on an official disciple."

Her speech up until this point had been rapid, leaving me no time to ask any questions. *Is she trying to rescind her initial suggestion? Ahh, but wait, there's something I need to clear up before that.*

"What exactly *are* magia?" I asked. I'd heard of mages and hedge mages, but never magia. Plus, apprenticeships were contracts with children, so I felt like she could have pulled a few strings and simply not taken any money.

"Oh... I have to start from there? Are all you country folk like this?"

The noblewoman seemed to grow weary of my ignorance, but I couldn't help not knowing what I didn't know—and even her name and occupation were part of the unknown.

Tired of explanations, she listlessly puffed another cloud of smoke at my sincere curiosity, but nonetheless began explaining the state-funded research institute that was the College of Magic and the magia that populated it.

The Imperial College of Magic had been founded alongside the Trialist Empire itself and was home to the scholarly endeavors of recognized magicians who wished to study the intricacies of spells and cantrips. With its main branch located in the capital, the college collected and tested the very theoretical foundations of magic, and was the only government entity that could publicly use their wizardry as they pleased.

Mages recognized by the college were geniuses a cut above the

usual rabble, and they proved their distinction from the faceless crowds of other spellcasters to attain the rank of magus. They weren't mere users of magic, but an educated class of minds who were to pave the path for magic as a whole.

The college was similar in mission to the public universities of modern Japan, and magia were akin to licensed doctors: their ability was rigorously tested in a national exam of unparalleled difficulty.

I'd never known the empire had such a position. Apparently magia were halfway to being bureaucrats, belonging to the only branch of government that could officially wield magic. And, using their political sway, they imposed ample tuition on any and all apprenticeships to prevent the unbridled spread of knowledge. Thinking back, the old man who'd given me the ring had said something similar. It all finally clicked.

That said, magia weren't on that tight of a leash. They were free to dabble in financial ventures and they could research whatever they liked, within reason. The college would look the other way so long as the magus in question didn't overstep their bounds, and that applied to rearing a successor as well. The empire knew that trying to control everything was doomed to fail.

However, the danger a changeling posed was a different matter entirely. The methuselah mage—apologies, *magus*—explained that it would all be pointless if the Rhinian authorities didn't accept Elisa as an official magus.

“Your sister absolutely must become a magus to survive,” she said with a hefty pause. “But that comes at a steep cost.”

When I asked how much the tuition would be, the magus puffed another cloud of smoke and nonchalantly gave her answer: “A mage with no connections would need thirty drachmae to enter the college, but an apprenticeship with a magus one knows would only cost a minimum of fifteen.”

Although she spoke like she was listing off the prices of canned coffee at a convenience store, the numbers themselves were absurd. Give or take, a farming family made five drachmae per year, and even households with large fields and supplementary income would hit their ceiling around seven.

Considering our recent expenditure to build a second residence for Heinz and Mina, you wouldn't find that much money if you turned our home upside down and shook it. To think that we'd need more than twice that... Well, it certainly reflected just how gravely the empire prioritized keeping its secrets tightly wound.

Furthermore, the magus had said a “minimum” of fifteen. Like weapons and wine, the opportunity to learn had a legally mandated lower bound, and it was in the order of gold pieces. Which meant that

to receive the tutelage of a famous magus, one would expect an even higher cost of entry.

“Well, I have no issue with fifteen drachmae per year.”

“Per year?!” I shouted, unable to suppress my shock. *Hold on, it’s not a one-time payment?! It’s annual?! That’s forty-five drachmae for three years, or ninety for six! Forget shaking our house down for pennies, we wouldn’t be able to afford that if we sold the whole thing!*

I nearly fainted from the thought of paying that much money, and the magus watched me peculiarly. I could tell that she hadn’t managed to internalize why I was so distressed—and how could a blue-blooded noble possibly hope to comprehend the fiscal values of a commoner? Returning to the information era, she was like the genteel ladies who’d never drunk coffee out of a can; surely the gap in our understanding would have been played off for a cute laugh had we been in a manga.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose it might be a tad out of reach?”

“If shirking our taxes and refusing food and drink for a year only to come up short for half of that amount is a ‘tad’ short, then it is as you say, madam.”

“Truly? Do all the peasantry live this way?”

I’ll fucking kill you! I exploded internally. *Calm down. She’s a noble. She is a creature native to a completely different world from you,* I told myself. I would run out of blood vessels if I kept popping off at every turn like this.

“Enough talk of income and prices,” she said, rerailing the conversation. “I have a proposition that will solve all that ails you.”

We’re finally getting to the meat of it. I’d known she had something she wanted from me from the moment this esteemed magus chose to spend her precious time speaking to a rural kid like me.

“Would you like to become my servant?”

“Servant?” Her suggestion came so far from left field that it took everything in me to keep my jaw from dropping to the floor.

The antiquated system of indentured servitude was alive and well in the Trialist Empire. Perhaps it wasn’t outdated per se, considering that the political systems at play seemed akin to either the early or High Middle Ages, but I found the whole deal horribly archaic.

Many a lowborn urban son had his rights signed away by his parents, working hard hours at stores and factories across the country. It was a simple form of mentorship: in exchange for room, board, and a chance to put one’s most malleable years to use learning a trade, indentured servants worked for free until they were of age. Of course, this career path required a dependable master to serve, and wasn’t readily available by any means.

“Indeed, I want to take you on as my steward. Putting the down

payment on your contract that I'd customarily hand to your parents toward your sister's tuition would be a trivial task. What do you think? I happen to be of the opinion that it is quite the bargain," she said with a showy smile—no, a *sneer*.

The magus was right: the deal was everything I could have asked for. A scrawny farm boy like me had no hope of finding employment at the rate of fifteen drachmae per year when the skilled scribes that reported straight to the magistrate barely made that much.

This arrangement was transparently too good to be true. To say that she had ulterior motives was an understatement. I could tell I was in for more than the typical "Sorry for tricking you" that came up in tabletop quests, but did I have any right to refuse?

Nay, none whatsoever. No matter how shady the offer seemed, I couldn't turn away from the sliver of hope that I might be able to save Elisa. I was willing to grind my own future to dust so long as she could grow up safe and sound, even if the methuselah tore off my limbs and dug out my eyeballs to pass the time.

I folded over the blanket and stepped out of bed, kneeling down before the seated magus, doing my utmost to play the part of a loyal retainer.

"I humbly accept your offer."

"Well said. Good boy," she said with a satisfied nod. As she exhaled another thin stream of smoke, I suddenly remembered something important.

"I apologize for troubling you, but as a formal servant, may I have the honor of knowing the name of my esteemed master?"

The magus finally realized when I asked this question that neither she nor I had introduced ourselves. I chalked it up to the thought never occurring to her lofty noble mind. Faced with lowly commoners, she had little interest in giving her own name, and even less in remembering ours. After a beat, she smacked the ashen leaves out of her pipe and recrossed her legs as she began the chore of introducing herself.

"I am Agrippina," she announced. "Agrippina du Stahl, formal researcher at the Trialist Empire of Rhine's Imperial College of Magic, and member of Leizniz's cadre, the School of Daybreak."

My first impression was one of danger. Her name was infamous in my past life as the birth mother of one of history's greatest villains, still berated to the modern day. Although I could not yet understand what any of the following titles meant, I was sure they were each weighty in their own right.

"I am Erich," I mirrored. "Erich of Konigstuhl canton, fourth and lastborn son to Johannes."

No matter. I'll do anything to keep Elisa alive. Indentured servitude is

nothing compared to crossing blades with a slew of bandits. Still kneeling, I bowed my head deeply in the face of my venerated dame.

“Mm. Well, Erich, do your best to please me. I shall act as I please, so feel free to do all that you can to accomplish your own goals.”

I saw no need for heartfelt fealty so long as I played my part—after all, she seemed to be thinking the exact same thing.

[Tips] Indentured servitude is a system that prevents large social upheaval while still attending to the needs of employment and social mobility of the masses. A similar concept known as the *decchi system* was used in feudal Japan, where young apprentices would work their way up to being a full-fledged artisan. In the empire, servitude is one of the few legal avenues for a minor to find work.



Agrippina du Stahl was a young—by methuselah standards—woman who hailed from the Kingdom of Seine, which lay a handful of satellite states to the empire’s west. The nobiliary particle “du” proved her family’s well-established pedigree, and her father’s barony was vast enough to live up to their stature.

However, the methuselah landholder had little regard for his territory; Sir Stahl was famous for his love of travel. He had a bad habit of leaving the management of his estate to his retainers for the better part of his time as he wandered around the globe. At times, the king would attempt to recall him only to be at a loss for where to deliver the summons.

To give you a taste of his carefree indulgence, he had once spent twenty years without returning to his motherland. Further, he’d completely missed an entire civil war on a three-year vacation—his words upon returning to the royal palace had been etched into history: “What? There’s a new king? When did that geezer die?”

Naturally, Agrippina had spent her youth ferried around by her family’s wanderlust. She had spent almost none of her one hundred and fifty years of life in the kingdom that had conferred nobility upon her.

When she celebrated her centennial coming-of-age, she practically spat in the face of aristocracy and cast her lot with the Imperial College in Rhine. Her choice came solely from her partiality to Rhinian cuisine and weather.

Her parents had only said, “Well, do as you please,” and ordered their people to send her a ludicrous allowance. They too were something of a lost cause, but that was beside the point.

The methuselah are defined by this sort of behavior. It would be futile for a mensch or any other fleeting form of life to try and amend their ways. Just as we cannot hope to fathom the qualia associated with marching in a row of ants, the eternal methuselah simply fail to comprehend mortal values.

At any rate, perhaps as a reaction to her childhood experiences, Agrippina’s excessive degeneracy culminated in one simple statement: “I think I’m quite done with travel.” Where her father had been a stringless kite, she was destined to be an immovable paperweight.

Agrippina took full advantage of her race’s flawless digestive system and its lack of waste excretion to spend *seven straight years* cooped up in the college’s massive library. The remarkable woman read at her leisure for the entire duration.

A normal person would have been driven mad by this sort of life. That she chose it of her own free will while basking in the glory of her debauchery begged the question: could methuselah truly be

considered sane?

What was more, after half a decade, she simply commented, "I've a handle on the arrangement of books here." From then on, she lay on the bed she'd dragged into a reading room and didn't move for the last two years.

This was the kind of creature a methuselah was. They immersed themselves in all they favored and paid no mind even if it cost them everything else. From a mortal perspective, they could be considered broken organisms.

The young methuselah simply enjoyed her perfect world with every fiber of her being. However, her Eden would not last long. She may have been the highborn daughter of a foreign noble, but the library's archivist commanded immense authority in his domain. Eventually, the librarian's patience reached its limit.

When Agrippina's ample donations of gold and transcriptions could no longer stay the librarian's wrath, she was forcibly removed after a lengthy discussion. From then on, she began her life anew in her allotted research workshop.

Alas, if one were to ask whether that led to her reexamining her behavior, the answer was an emphatic no. Rather, if methuselah were so commendable that they'd rethink their priorities after a setback of this scale, they would have trampled over every other race to lay claim to the planet long ago.

Upon being thrust out of the magnificent library, she cooped up in her own workshop. Shut-ins were destined to be shut-ins no matter where they went, it seemed.

Of course, the college was by no means a lenient place: registered researchers and professors alike had an obligation to attend periodic lectures and debates. No matter how famous the lecturer or how powerful the noble, the rules remained steadfast. In the worst case, one could be demoted or stripped entirely of their title.

"Magus" was more than *just* a title—it was an epithet reserved only for those who furthered the pursuit of magic. The professoriat looked the other way for seven years, owing to Sir Stahl's hefty cash contributions and the fact that Agrippina was the successor to a foreign noble house. After years of letting her get away with only writing papers, the library incident left them no more room for charity.

The council of professors demanded that she do more than publish treatises—she was to attend lectures and act the part of a proper researcher. Although their society prized byzantine speech, they made their decree as sternly and directly as possible.

And yet, alas, she did not amend her ways.

Agrippina was sloth incarnate: she used farsight spells or familiars

to attend lectures, and turned in her reports by folding the paper into an artificial life-form that would fly to its destination. On top of all this, her highest achievement in sloth was when she invented a piece of parchment that synced up with the contents of a debate in real time to avoid attending in person.

She was a first in history. True, there had been cases where students or researchers would utilize farsight or familiars to listen in on lectures. To forbid that would be to burden those who were fully employed or paid their way through school by taking on extra jobs.

However, all the brilliant minds of the lecturers combined hadn't predicted that some buffoon would use these means for *every* class. Agrippina was no doubt the first methuselah to squander this much time in the name of slovenliness.

Since her actions were technically allowed, they were at an impasse. Without an effective breakthrough in sight, time went idly by...until the dean of her cadre could take her indolence no longer and exploded in rage. Agrippina's room was isolated using the lost art of space-bending magic, but the dean forced her way in anyway and demanded that she depart for fieldwork immediately.

The methuselah violently resisted the order to accompany a caravan like a normal wandering mage, but had no choice but to concede when the dean threatened to kick her out of the School of Daybreak. Not belonging to a cadre was barely acceptable for a student, but to a researcher with a proper lab, it was on par with being expelled from the college entirely.

Agrippina had known from the start that it wasn't going to be a quick trip. She could no longer remember how long it had been since the dean had sent her on this research journey and told her not to come back without explicit permission.

Although she was fatigued by her long excursion, she had one shining nugget of information. If she recalled correctly, somewhere during the endless sermon that marked her departure, the dean had said something along the lines of "I suppose you'll be forced to return if you take in an apprentice by some *miracle*, but know that..." Of course, the stringent dean would never allow her to pick up some random child to tutor.

At worst, the child would be taken in as an official student of the college. If the dean took on the responsibility of raising them instead, Agrippina would once again be sent on her merry way. She needed *something*, some reason to legally reclaim her nest at the college as a young mage's master.

Today, fortune had shone on her: she'd finally found a child that had no choice but to be her disciple. She didn't care for the money. Rotten as she was, she was a noble. Her family's loyal retainers

delivered an allowance every so often, and she'd saved most of the money she made from her publications. Though it was easy to forget, she was a superb magician in her own right.

The only part of Agrippina that was spoiled beyond salvation was her character. With her ticket to self-confinement in hand, the magus was in a terribly good mood. To be able to return to the college—the home of her beloved workshop—both legally and with good reason left her overjoyed.

What was more, the deal came packaged with a handy little manservant. Agrippina's day could not get any better.

[Tips] There are three titles at the college. Students are mages in training; researchers are given a workshop; professors lead the former two.

Students and researchers generally align themselves with factions headed by their professors, and a good relationship with these lecturers is key to obtaining access to proprietary knowledge or laboratory funding. This is due to the fact that all of the college's functions are dictated by a committee of professors, and the empire has little concern for its internal relations and finances.

Spring of the Twelfth Year (II)

Rulebook

A book that contains all of the information of a tabletop's world, akin to the disc a video game is on. It contains both basic rules and character information to set the scene before the adventure begins.

There also may or may not be a handful of pages that the players shouldn't see...

It had taken an entire day to iron out all of the details.

After our discussion, Lady Agrippina shoved me back into bed, since I was still seriously beat-up in spite of all her healing magic. She puffed a cloud of smoke at me and I was out like a light.

Apparently, I'd broken bones in five places, had cuts in countless more, and had more bruised skin than not. The fact that I could already move after a quick nap proved that my new liege was an incredible mage—er, magus.

When I awoke for the second time, my parents, the village chief, the bishop, and even the local scribe were packed in the building, causing a huge fuss. What about the contract? Can he work as a child? How do we deal with Elisa? Questions and concerns abounded and it took the whole day for everyone to sign their name and seal the documents with their blood.

I was finally free, but the adults continued to flesh out the minutiae at the chief's house. I couldn't help but feel like their talks were missing a key person of interest—namely me—but adults never like to let children in on difficult discussions. If I'd been in my father's shoes, I wouldn't have let my son see me debate like that either.

Still, it all turned out so messy... I'd known that the day would come for me to leave Konigstuhl behind, but I never thought my departure would be so soon. What was more, I didn't think I'd be bringing my little sister with me to the capital that stood at the heart of the Trialist Empire.

This was too much, even for a PC's character bio. My situation was a few times wilder than surviving an airship crash or something to that effect. *I swear my dice are rigged!*

"I see things have taken an unexpected turn."

I whipped around in surprise to see my grim childhood friend. It was rare for Margit to look so serious, and rarer still for her to forgo

her usual surprise attack. Seeing her this way shattered my heart.

“I’ve been waiting for you rather anxiously. The rumors have already spread throughout the canton.” She slowly and silently made her way toward me on her little spider legs, and a dull shine reflected off her amber eyes. “Do you have a moment to spare?”

Margit’s question was akin to an order. I nodded awkwardly, took her outstretched hand, and began to walk beside her. By no means could I refuse her here; at any rate, her tone left me with no will to try. The bone-chilling voice she’d used made me think this was how male spiders felt when their female counterparts stared them down.

We strolled along at a strange pace where I couldn’t tell who was pulling whom. We made our way to a large hill on the edge of the canton in total silence. There was nothing of interest here—not so much as a blooming flower. At most, I could mention that we had a clear view of both of our houses and the forest we used to play in as children.

When I took a seat on the ground, Margit did not choose to sit on the crossed legs that had effectively become her assigned seat; instead, she folded her legs a little ways in front of me. She looked as cute as a cat tucked into a box, but this was no time for rose-tinted glasses.

If I dared to say something stupid, the long fangs that stuck out past her lips would rend my neck asunder—or at least, that was the aura she gave off. Her empty stare urged me to come clean or face the wrath of her dagger, so I let the toxic plumes of truth freely billow from my mouth.

I told her about Elisa, about changelings, and about my future. Margit didn’t so much as nod, let alone make any comments. She simply listened until the very end of my tale and then heaved the heaviest sigh I’d ever heard. Her expelled breath was so weighty that it threatened to soak into my soul and leave debris sitting at the bottom of my heart.

“Things truly have gotten out of hand,” she said, her voice a swirl of emotions. There were many things she wanted to say, but with so much to touch on, these simple words were all that she could muster.

I wasn’t to blame, but the unknowable gravity of her statement made me want to apologize.

“An indentured servant...to a mage in the capital, no less. This is far, far more convoluted than I could have ever imagined. Who would have thought that my surprise at Elisa’s kidnapping would be overwritten so quickly?”

I watched her cover her right eye with her hand and look up at the sky as if to push through an aching migraine. I didn’t have any words for her—how could I, when I felt the same way?

Intellectually, I knew for a fact that Elisa was a changeling. Yet I

still didn't truly believe it; there was no reality to the thought that she might be robbed of a happy life as some sort of "specimen."

Somewhere, deep inside, I still believed that this was all a joke. The situation was so unbelievable that it had to be my brain playing tricks on me, and I'd wake up in my own bed after one more blink.

Then everything would be back to normal. Elisa would be a little mensch girl with a poor constitution, and I would have no need to venture to the capital. I would grow up in Konigstuhl and one day leave on my adventure, only coming back years later to celebrate a full-grown Elisa's wedding. This was the sort of wonderful dream that... *Oh, it's a dream. I'm clinging to a fantasy.*

However, it was soon time to return to reality. This was no dream—at the very least, not the kind that one wanted to see at night. Elisa was to leave for the capital as a magus's apprentice, and I was to join her as a servant to pay for her tuition.

"It's not like I'm going to be a servant forever," I said, more to myself than her. "I don't intend to spend my entire life attending to some magus."

"But it isn't the sort of job where you'll be free to leave after a year, is it? Considering how much money you need to earn, one would normally expect you to spend a lifetime paying it back."

My self-consolation was cleanly cut down by my companion's logic. She was right: the minimum to apprentice under a magus was fifteen drachmae. Average people like us could hardly begin to imagine that sort of wealth. And if I could barely imagine the price of one year's tuition, then the total cost until graduation was beyond even the land of dreams.

The money was being loaned. My pay as a servant would go straight to our debts for Elisa's tuition and overhead. I wasn't holding out until my sister graduated, but until I earned back every penny that we owed the college. The fishy magus had said it herself: she couldn't change the regulations, so I would have to work to pay my dues.

That begged the question—how much was a servant paid? Well, accounting for room and board, I wouldn't even be earning pennies in the beginning. I finally had a means of earning a wage, but paying for my own living expenses meant my income would be subatomic in scale.

The pile of gold coins I owed was sure to stack up to a mountain. That unflinching mound of debt would indeed never disappear with a normal salary.

On the other hand, fairies were practically sentient phenomena, and had far greater aptitude for magic than any mensch. Still, I'd been told that an average student had to study for a minimum of five years before attaining a research position. Unless Elisa turned out to be a

grade-skipping genius, it was best to calculate at least five years of expenditures.

The tuition alone totaled seventy-five drachmae. A commoner would need to redo their lives not once, not twice, but tens of times to have that kind of spending money. But that was a laughably sloppy estimate. No matter what I did, that alone wouldn't cut it.

Having once been in college myself, I knew that students leaked money like nobody's business. Humans lost money just taking in and pushing out food, and it was plain as day that higher learning only exacerbated the problem.

I didn't know if the college had an official uniform, but Elisa would certainly need a mage's robe. Even if she didn't, she was still a growing child and would require new threads as she matured.

Clothing was much, much more expensive in this era than the denizens of modernity would suspect. Even an inferior product fetched dozens of silver coins. Woven cotton cost a hideous amount in labor, and the act of sewing together the cloth into something wearable added up to a price that no one would expect to be anywhere in the vicinity of cheap.

Thus, we common folk perennially patched up our old wear. Particularly impoverished families went as far as to sell their winter clothes for summer ones when the weather got warmer, and vice versa when autumn came to a close.

Elisa was going to be surrounded by the sons and daughters of nobles or wealthy commoners. I'd feel awful if I couldn't provide her with respectable attire. She was sure to get bullied if she looked too ragged. Appearance was more than enough reason for one person to push around another, and that was especially true for irregular beings like changelings.

My guts began to churn just thinking about it. Holding back on Elisa's wardrobe was definitely a no.

And with this being a school and all, there were sure to be textbooks of some kind. Like clothing, parchment in this era was mind-bogglingly expensive. The giant stacks of rulebooks and supplements that I'd once owned couldn't even compare.

A normal book easily went for two to three drachmae. Extravagant works bound with decorated leather of perfect make commonly went for tens of drachmae. Rare volumes adorned with precious gemstones were traded in the order of *territories*. What would I do if they were required per subject? The thought alone made me dizzy.

On top of that, Elisa needed to live. Our parents would likely handle the citizens tax for us, but the cost of living for the two of us would by no means be inexpensive. I knew masters were meant to

care for their disciples, but my impression of the walking mass of irresponsibility that was Lady Agrippina made me think I ought to curb my expectations. I could envision the methuselah perplexed by our mensch values and saying, "What? You need to eat *every* day?"

"Ten years?" Margit asked. "Twenty? Erich, how long do you intend to be gone?"

"I hope to be done in five years or so," I replied, after a long, miserable stretch of dead air.

In the time that I was slated to spend working, I would come of age. From there, I'd be able to legally work a second job and my supplementary income would go straight to our debts.

The amount we would owe would normally take a lifetime to repay, but fortunately, I was anything but normal. By pushing the future Buddha's blessing to its limits, I knew I would be able to weasel out a new revenue stream or two.

For Elisa, I would never be stingy. If I could buy my dear sister's life with experience points, then I absolutely would.

Still, I'd attended public university in my last life and never experienced the pain of student loans. Suddenly finding myself in a situation like the scholarship recipients at private universities at the tender age of twelve was quite the curveball.

Well, there was no use in whining. My life hung on my noble master. All that was left to see was how talented my little sister was.

"Five years, is it? How optimistic of you."

"I plan on doing everything I can to make it out in that time."

"Even then, in five years I'll be nineteen, you know? Everyone will laugh at me for being unwed," she said with a pout.

The most common ages to marry in Rhine were from fifteen to seventeen, or eighteen if you really pushed it. Anyone single past that point would be avoided as either an unwanted bride or a widow who failed to remarry.

I didn't bother to confirm the exact implications of her statement—that would be far too tactless. I was well aware of the direction our relationship had been headed. Had we been born to a certain instance of Tokyo, our connection would have had a big old heart on it.

"I'll do my best," I said after a long pause.

"And you'll return before we're too old to adventure?"

"I'll try."

"Will you now?"

Without a sound, her lower half began to skitter and she scurried onto my lap. Her hazel eyes shot straight through me with a perilous orange glimmer.

"Do you swear it? Do you swear that you will finish your tenure as a servant to take me on an adventure?"

Margit spoke harshly. Her usual tone gently caressed my brain, but her current voice drove a wedge into my heart. This was more than a question—it was a pointed blade that was dissecting the foundation of my will.

“I do,” I said. “I swear. We’ve been preparing for so long; I won’t let it go to waste. I’ll become an adventurer and make sure Elisa graduates safe and sound; I’m going to do both.”

Her razored interrogation only made my response all the more sincere. The scalpel had no need to make its incision, for I had dragged my answer out of the depths of my heart.

I had made my decision long ago: if I could be anything, then I would chase what I truly desired. Adventuring wasn’t a future I’d chosen on a whim; I’d started on this path because everyone believed I could do it. At the same time, I wanted to be a good brother; I hoped to keep my head high as Elisa continued to look up to me.

This was my heartfelt manifesto. After spending twelve years as Erich from Konigstuhl canton, these words were my resolution given form. I had an obligation to hold my determination close to my heart to give meaning to the twelve years my family and friends had raised and loved me—to maintain the authenticity of the seven years I spent as *me*.

To that end, I was willing to dedicate all of the experience I’d saved up. I would dump it all into housework skills if I had to. I could still hold my own as a swordsman at my current level, after all.

This was sure to be a detour. However, I refused to lie to myself. I was going to do as I willed, like the heroes of the games I had once lost myself in.

I’d always felt fantastic at the end of a good session. Seeing stories take concrete form and the characters we’d created reach some sort of conclusion was electrifying. Even when they ended up doomed to a horrible fate, it had always been fun because my friends and I were the ones weaving the story together in that messy old clubroom.

However, the greatest joy was when all of our characters accomplished their goals upon reaching the grand finale. We’d spent countless hours deliberating away the precious years of our youth to chase that glory time and time again.

My situation now was the same. It was my own life, but nothing else had changed. Thus, I was going to chase after my will to become the me that I wanted to be. Isn’t that what the future Buddha had sent me to do?

“Do what thou wilt,” was it? The tagline of a familiar evil god had become the sweetest heavenly decree I could ever hear. With no divine mandate to strive for, I’d been permitted to pursue my dreams. *What a freeing gospel.*

That's right. I'm going to become an adventurer...and Elisa's hero. I packed my conviction into my gaze and quietly stared into Margit's hazel gems.

God knows how long we locked eyes. The gentle red of evening began to shift into a dim purple. As day and night blended into twilight, the stars found their place beside the gibbous moon.

The waning lunar body had a poetic epithet in my homeland of yore: the *Fukemachi-zuki*. I'd shared its name once upon a time—we were both to await the faraway future where we would return to being whole as the mouth of night readied to swallow the last of our old selves. *Oh, how I hope to shine as fully as you.*

“Really? Well...that's just like you.” Margit spoke naturally in the common dialect. Her gaze never left mine, but her hardened expression suddenly remembered what it was like to have color when she smiled. “Fine, I'll believe in you. There aren't any other girls as kind as me out there, you know?”

“I know,” I answered. “Thank you, Margit.”

I was convinced that she would continue waiting for the start of our adventure. After all, she'd never lied to me before—not a single time, and not even as a joke.

So although I trusted her promise, I had to be sure not to let it coddle me. Men are creatures prone to egotistical delusions that suit them, like “She'll always love me, and me alone.”

“When I set out on my adventure, my first stop will be to come and get you,” I swore.

All I could offer for her faith was my solemn oath. Some consider vows without form to be hollow, but an earnest promise takes shape in the hearts of those who believe it. No matter what anyone else believed, I held this truth firm.

Margit responded in kind with a giggle so soft that I would have missed it from any other distance. She suddenly raised her head and slipped her hands around the back of my neck. Back in a familiar position, the adorable arachne's cute little nose came up to touch mine.

The indomitable spirit in her eyes melted into a droopy smile. Although her sleek canines perilously poked from the sides of her mouth, her lips were enchanting all the same. Individually, her features were akin to a young girl's, but they combined to form a bewitching air of a proper lady. Our gazes never faltered as our noses touched and eyelashes intertwined. I could hardly breathe.

“Then I'll make it so you can't forget me.” The sweet shivers Margit had conditioned into my body made an appearance once again. Her sweet, unchanging voice always tickled the back of my brain. “Close your eyes...”

Wait, is she doing what I think she's doing? Seriously? Is this happening? I never had an episode this sugary in my last life. Am I allowed to brag about this? I'm a man's man now, right? I'm celebrating tonight!

My train of thought zipped around in hysteria until the breath I'd been feeling on my lips suddenly took a turn to my left. By the time my brain caught up, I could feel the warmth of Margit's skin on my cheek and her breath tickled my ear.

Huh? Wait a second what's going—"Owwww?!"

A jolt of sheer pain attacked my ear without rhyme or reason. I jumped in surprise, but her grip on my neck was too tight to shake off. Any attempt to investigate the source of my ails was blocked by Margit's head. In fact, she still had my earlobe secured in her mouth, so there was nothing I could do.

Huh? What is this?! What's happening to me?!



After a few dozen seconds of bewilderment and agony, Margit finally unhanding my ear. I curiously raised my hand to it to find it slick with saliva and blood. But I also clearly felt an indent at my fingertips. *Is this a hole?* After touching it a bit longer, it was clear that she'd opened a hole straight through my earlobe.

"Thank you for the meal," she said, licking my blood off her lips. The last vestiges of daylight glimmered off her inhuman fangs. It seemed she'd deftly used those to stab through the flesh of my ear.

"Wha—but? Why?! Why'd you bite me?!"

"I already told you. I'm going to make sure you never forget our promise." As Margit spoke, she peeled off the hand protecting my ear and inserted something into the still throbbing hole. I caught a glance of it; it was a pink seashell that had been turned into an earring.

The girly piercing didn't seem to be anything special. It was the kind that children bought for fun at festivals for the price of a silver piece or so. I doubted she'd had it long. I suspected she had bought it at a stall while I'd been stuck inside today—but on second thought, she'd been waiting right by the chief's house the entire time, so I was probably wrong.

"Don't take it off, okay? This is the proof of our vow. Think of me whenever you look at it."

Now hold on, the story behind this earring is all fine and dandy, but how could you... Um... Margit's smile instantaneously blew away all of my anger. Strangely, seeing her satisfied made me think, *Oh well, at least she didn't tear my ear open.*

Man, being pretty is so unfair...

While I was busy pondering the absurdity of the world, Margit placed something else in my hand. I looked down to see a lengthy needle. It was large, sturdy—geared toward leathercraft more than needlework. Still damp, it smelled of the strong spirits that we used to disinfect things.

"Now, would you please return the favor?" she said, sticking out her right ear.

"Huh?" *What? You don't mean... Am I piercing your ear too? Hold on, that's way too deviant for me. What kind of weird fetish is this?*

"What are you waiting for?" she asked. "I made sure that you won't forget about me. Don't you want to make sure I won't forget about you too?"

For whatever reason, her sideways glance as she held up her hair cracked my will to resist in no time flat. The fact that she was so seductive despite tempting me to do something so insane had to be chalked up to more than her demihuman status.

"Get ready, because it's probably going to hurt like crazy. It did

for me.”

“That’s fine. Won’t you show me what pain is like?”

Jeez, all these suggestive overtones are going to give me a heart attack!

I beat down the blaring alarm of my beating heart and pressed the needle against her ear. One push was all it took to prick straight through her soft earlobe and send scarlet droplets dancing through the air. Illuminated by both setting sun and rising moon, the beauty before me was indescribable.

“Hngh...”

Margit let out one last provocative moan as I pulled the needle out. She ran her fingers across the mark it left with a mix of regret and tender sentiment. Without even stopping her dripping blood, she handed me the other half of the pair of accessories.

I was to take my turn with this as well, I presumed. We’d witnessed a similar rite last fall, but this really was a bit kinkier than I was comfortable with. But Margit seemed happy, so...I suppose it was fine. Lit in a fleeting vermilion, her bloody smile was sure to stick with me for as long as I lived.

[Tips] For men, a left earring represents courage and pride; for women, a right earring represents kindness and maturity. To take one earring each from a set is symbolic of an unbreakable bond.

Spring of the Twelfth Year (III)

Supplement

An accompanying booklet or addendum to a rulebook that adds to the base game. Can add skills and items for PCs, fresh settings for adventures, new NPCs, and different enemy types to combat.

Seeing a more developed world is often fun, but unrestricted expansion can sometimes lead to great confusion.

Following my unforgettable episode on the twilight hill, I returned home without hope for tranquility. Putting our little princess to sleep was a nightmare.

And of course it was. Elisa was seven and mentally even younger; she was bound to throw a fuss after being kidnapped, witnessing a bloodbath, and being told that she was to leave home in two to three days. For a young child with a small view of the world, her parents and family were existence itself. I may have been her favorite, but she loved every member of our household nearly as much.

Elisa beamed when our father lifted her into the air. She loved our mother's cooking and went on and on about how she'd help too when she was all grown up. Our three older brothers fawned over her, and she played the part of a proper princess when she was with them.

And she was just as fond of her kind new sister-in-law as she was of her blood relations. Having been surrounded by boys all her life, she was always ecstatic when Mina found a moment between chores to do her hair. Elisa had been starved of girly activities in this household full of men, so her excitement was especially pronounced.

No matter the reason, a literal child could not swallow the thought of being torn away from her beloved family. To borrow an age-old adage, *she's just a kid*.

We all tried to explain that I'd be with her and that it was for her own good, but that failed to quell Elisa's tantrum. It was easy to say that her lack of understanding was evidence of her immaturity, but anyone that could remember their own childhood could only look on in pain. Had I been in her shoes, I doubt I would have obediently followed a fishy methuselah stranger to the capital. I knew with my current psyche that this was necessary for the peace of our family and canton. However, thinking back to my real seven-year-old self, it would have been utterly impossible to convince me.

Everyone's understanding of Elisa's pain fueled our efforts to assuage her. Halfway through the night, she finally ran out of energy and fell asleep—but at this rate, she'd run amok in the morning too.

Once our family had overcome the fierce battle that would have earned us a mountain of complaints in any apartment complex, everyone was drained. The young husband and wife dragged themselves to their own lodging and the twins marched to their room like a pair of living dead. My mother had carried Elisa to her bed, but had knocked out with her judging from the fact that she still hadn't returned. Crumpled up like old rags, my father and I were the only ones left in the living room.

"Would you like something to drink, father?"

"Yeah, I would," he said wearily. He threw himself onto a chair and asked, "Can you go to the kitchen and bring me the *special*?"

I opened a false bottom in our kitchen cupboard to uncover my father's prized liquor (he'd shown me where it was knowing that *I* wouldn't swipe it while he wasn't looking). The liquid gold was rye whiskey, famed as a staple in the empire's northern region. I'd stopped being surprised at the presence of historically misplaced items long ago, and carefully pulled out the clear glass bottle.

One look was enough to tell it hadn't been cheap. Horse-drawn caravans were the most common means of transportation, so imported goods were mind-bogglingly expensive. Unlike the twenty-first century, a single click of a button did not suffice to sample exotic flavors from pole to pole.

The whiskey must have tripled in price on its long journey here, and my father only relished it on two types of occasions. First, he drank in the event of a monumentally good turn. Once, when Elisa had recovered from a particularly nasty fever, I'd seen him slowly, blissfully sipping away at a glass. The second was when a situation arose that was too hard for him to bear sober.

With a third of the bottle left, my father portioned it out into a shot glass and downed it without bothering to dilute. The odor was enough to tell that the liquor was strong. I was impressed for a moment until the thought crossed my mind that perhaps this was the only way he could cope with our current reality; I'd never seen my dependable old man so spiritless.

The first gulp hadn't been enough, so he drank again, and then a third time, until his hands finally stopped.

"Erich, do you want a shot?"

A mellow amber rolled back and forth in the small glass he handed me. The pungent scent of alcohol didn't suit my twelve-year-old palate, so I normally would have refused. Yet tonight, I too wanted a drink.

Knocking it back, the burning heat and surprisingly appetizing flavor slid down into my gut. The acidic aftertaste wasn't bad either, and I reckoned that I would enjoy this drink immensely once my tongue had a few years to develop.

"That was great. You really are my son," he said.

Picking the glass back up with a laugh, he poured himself another and downed it like the first. Since the liquor was so strong, I figured it would pair well with a snack; I brought out some leftover dried meats from winter and my father began cutting them without a word.

"I never would've thought it'd turn out like this. Fate is so cruel."

The alcoholic lubricant had begun to loosen his lips. Following his fourth shot, he locked eyes with me and his mouth quivered with hesitation, but eventually started speaking very quietly.

"I don't think I've ever told you this, but I'm actually a second-born son."

"Really?" *I had no idea.*

Both of my grandparents had passed away before I'd been born—out of us children, only Heinz had ever seen them, and it had been when he was too young to remember—and I'd never heard this detail from anyone else. Our relatives in the canton had no reason to go out of their way to tell us. I had uncles that had become bridegrooms and aunts that had become brides, but not a single one of them had ever mentioned anything of the sort.

I wonder how my father inherited the house in this era of primogeniture?

"That's right. My brother, well, when I was... Was I eighteen?"

"Don't ask me."

Drink clouded his mind and the finer numerical details eluded him. After his drunken question, he mumbled, "Ah, that's right. I was eighteen," and nodded to himself in satisfaction.

Apparently, my father's elder brother and sister-in-law had fallen to a local plague before I'd been born. As the next in line of succession, he'd been urgently recalled to take care of the house and farm.

The shock of losing their firstborn had weakened my grandparents considerably, and the two of them had passed on shortly before the twins had been born. As a result, we were the only ones left at this house.

"That's why I know how much it hurts to give up on your dreams because of something out of your control." He spoke as if he were trying to swallow some intangible woe.

I'm sure he understood. My father had once been a young boy chasing his own dreams. In fact, he must have practically run away from home to not stay in the house as a second-born son.

"You see, I used to be a mercenary."

"Huh? *You?!?*"

Here I'd thought that nothing could possibly surprise me more than the fact that Elisa was a changeling, yet my expectations were shattered before the day's end.

My dad was a mercenary? This model farmer, popular throughout our canton—a sellsword, of all things?!

The image of mercenaries wasn't any better in the Trialist Empire than it was abroad: career fighters who earned a living by hacking and slashing, mixing their own blood with their enemies'. My father was certainly hardy, but I didn't see him fitting in with that crowd.

"Seven wars and fifteen skirmishes were all I could fit in three years' time. I cut down two generals and earned a fair bit of change. That's partly how we could afford more land a few years back. I bought Holter from an ol' buddy's place."

Today was a dizzying day. Surprising information and sensational events waited for me at every turn, crashing down like the waves of a rough sea. My little sister was a changeling, my childhood friend had opened a hole in my ear, and now my model citizen father turned out to be a former merc. *Give me a break, the shock's gonna fuse my cerebellum.*

"But see, when my ol' man came cryin' to me all sad and broken...I couldn't say no. The same fists that used to hurt so bad were clingin' to me so weakly..."

My father stared off into the distance in remembrance: he must have been imagining his own father's frail, withered hands. I felt like I could imagine why a mercenary that could twist off the stiff arms of other warriors couldn't have peeled away the thin stalks of a wrinkled farmer.

"I woulda never thought I'd make you do the same."

I'm sure my father had faced his own struggles. Mercenaries were practically cousins to bandits, but they were also professionals who shored up holes in proper armies—halfway to real soldiers. Where adventurers were expected to act in small parties, mercs based their entire livelihoods on coordinating with their company. His oath to the fellow troops he'd stood shoulder to shoulder with was sure to have been tough to break.

I could hardly imagine the agony of leaving that behind. Seeing his speech morph—no, *revert*—to a gruff and unfamiliar dialect as he dove into nostalgia plainly hinted at what he had left behind.

"I'm sorry. I know you have somethin' you wanna do. I'm so sorry that we're pushing this terrible fate on you."

Drowning in stupor, my father's sobbing words soaked painfully into my heart. I couldn't help but sympathize. No parent could ever

remain free of guilt as they sent their child to shoulder a burden that they could hardly be expected to repay within their lifetime. Yet even so...

“I don’t see it that way.”

“Huhhh?”

My resolution was exactly as I’d told Margit: I was going to become what I wanted to be. And I truly did want to be the cool older brother that was there for Elisa. Besides, our debt was massive, but by no means insurmountable. I could earn as much money as I set my mind to making. It was too early to steep in the throes of despair and break down into a tearful apology.

“I’m Elisa’s brother. Isn’t showing off to my little sister my whole job? How could I ever hate you for something that I *want* to do?”

I delivered my decree with a smile, stealing away his glass before he got too drunk and emptying it in my own mouth. The concentrated alcohol burned my throat and I could feel it boil in my stomach. Letting the heat rise to my brain, I left all hesitation in the dust and let myself bask in melodrama.

“No one is to blame. Not you, not mother, and not even Elisa herself. So please, won’t you stop apologizing? I’m only leaving to show off, after all.”

Holding back the words I wanted to say just because they were embarrassing would be a mistake. Just as every brother wishes to show off to his little sister, every son’s sincerest hope is to console his heartbroken father.

“Hah, I see. You’re just showin’ off?”

“That’s right. Once I’m done with that, I’ll go and do what I really want to do. I swear.”

“Ha ha ha, really now? Really?” He merrily repeated himself a few more times and then suddenly got up from his seat. He ordered me to sit still and left the room. With my well-trained Listening skill, I could hear him head toward our basement storage room.

To the best of my knowledge, there was nothing of interest there. It stored tools that we rarely used and foodstuffs that kept best in cool, dark locations.

After enough time to cool a hot bowl of soup, my father returned with a bag covered in dirt. The basement didn’t have any flooring, so I presumed that he’d dug it up. I’d known we had valuables hidden underground somewhere, and judging from how neatly it had been sealed away, it must have contained something priceless.

“I want you to take this. Figured I’d give it to you when you left the house, but I can tell that it ain’t too early to hand it off now.”

My father pulled out a single sword covered in oil paper from the bag. With its ornamentation removed and its blade neatly oiled, the

weapon looked like the quintessential Western arming sword. Plain as it was, the majestic steel gleamed in the candlelight.

"I used to use her 'fore I quit. My spear, shield, and armor all went out the door for cash, but I cut down a real general for this one. I just couldn't give her up. But I'm sure she woulda fetched a pretty penny," my father bragged.

He was precision incarnate while wiping off the oil with a spare rag, looking as happy as could be. What was more, the care that had gone into its wrapping left it without a speck of rust: my father's love for the blade could be seen in its healthy coat of oil and the fact that it had been kept underground, away from oxygen.

"It ain't quite on the same level as mystarille or mystic blades, but this is a damn good sword. I'm no expert, but the blacksmith said it was made with some fancy technique called pattern welding."

I didn't know this at the time, but I would find out later that pattern welding referred to forging together several different metallic compounds and laminating them into a single blade. Like the infamous swords of my motherland, the core and exterior were folded from slightly different substances, creating a tenacious edge perfect for cutting.

"I remember you looked at me like I was a blitherin' idiot back then, but I was just so happy."

"Back then" probably meant the autumn festival where I'd cut through a helmet. At the time, I had indeed thought, "What are you doing, old man?!" when he'd used a whole drachma to buy everyone drinks.

However, now I could see why. For a man who had literally put his life on the line to earn his keep, seeing his own son turn into a legendary swordsman that would live on in the canton for the rest of the generation must have filled him with a glee like no other.

"So I got a li'l full of myself and went wild. Well, not like I regret it, though."

How wondrous it was to see him speak of me with such pride and joy. My father had a thin yet full smile of maturity on his face, but I averted my gaze in embarrassment. Had I looked any longer, I was sure to burst into tears.

"So this sword is all yours."

He wiped off the last of the oil and handed the weapon to me. Stripped of embellishment, all that remained was the side view of a wolf engraved on the side of the blade along with an epitaph that was hardly legible through its scratches.

"Schutzwolfe?"

"Yep. She gets her name from an old monster from legend."

I had heard the basics of the myth myself. It recounted a wolf that

roamed the streets at night; although it would devour the rude on the spot, it would lead the weak and those who demonstrated proper respect to safety.

The sword must have been christened with the hope that it would lead its wielder back to those who awaited them... Ironically, it ended up with *me*.

Regardless, it was a stellar weapon. Its center of mass was well-placed despite its stark outline, and one swing was enough to tell it wasn't just light, but *usably* light. Swords relied on weight and speed to cut down their foes, and this was a flawless example of the right balance. I had a feeling that I could cut through a helmet made of pure mystarille with this.

"I leave it to you. Keep Elisa safe for us, Mr. Brother." With that said, my father neatly recorked the bottle and quietly returned it to its original hiding spot.

"I will." As he mumbled about drinking too much and stumbled to his bedroom, I remained standing with my head bowed.

[Tips] There are three types of mystic blades: adamant swords created by a magical process known as arcane forging; swords permanently enhanced with strengthening magic; and the physical manifestation of the *concept* of a "sword" or "slashing." Generally, most people think of either the first, second, or a combination of the two when they speak of mystic blades.

A lone training dummy stood before me. It consisted of an old, run-down set of armor wrapped around a wooden core, and had been beaten hundreds, if not thousands of times by watchmen over the years.

The scaled plates of metal were stained with long-dried blood; I could only assume it to be the final memento of some buffoon who tried to lay a hand on our canton. Whatever the case, it could no longer tell its story.

All I knew was that the wood beneath was sturdy and the armor itself had kept its form despite its years of abuse under the Konigstuhl Watch. Still, this was more than enough—at the very least, no human would be as sturdy as a chunk of armored wood.

"Hup!" I forwent both shouting and jumping and simply swung nimbly. Swords are maneuvered with the chest and legs, not the arms. I moved my entire body in sync, planting my feet and striking at the perfect angle to bolster my downward swing with the force of the earth supporting me.

With perfect form, even a young boy of twelve years could split shingled metal in two. The sword slipped through its target without

catching on the wood or paralyzing my hand. All that remained was the lingering gratification of the elegant strike.

A gentle breeze rolled past us, causing one half of the target to slide down as if it had only just realized its fatal wound. Schutzwolfe's sleek fang lived up to its name.

"By the Goddess!" the smith shouted in awe. He had graciously accepted my ludicrous request for a sheath and grip to be made in two days, and had even gone out of his way to polish the sword despite the fact that I'd woken him up in the wee hours of the morning.

Good, this will do. With a sword of this quality, cutting through flesh would be a simple matter of following the basics. I'd brought Hybrid Sword Arts to VI: Expert in my four years of training, so this much was to be expected when I factored in all my supporting skills and traits. Humility may be a virtue, but my ability had earned me the right to wield my father's beloved sword.

Going forward, I could concede that I was inexperienced, but never would I let myself claim to be weak. I'd protected my sister and inherited my father's dreams with my own two hands. I solemnly vowed to never defile either their pride or mine.

"Whew, my eyes aren't playing tricks, are they?"

The smith had come to see me test out Schutzwolfe under the pretext of checking the quality of his work, though that was surely an excuse. His trained eye couldn't find a single nick, let alone a bend in the metal.

"The blade's perfectly straight and doesn't even have a scratch after cutting right through *that*? That ain't normal."

To be fair, even the finest of blades usually didn't—or rather, couldn't—split armor in two, so his surprise was well-founded. Swords weren't designed to do that; I wouldn't have tried a stunt like this if I hadn't been testing its mettle. But just this once, I wanted to see what it was like to swing at full force.

"Kid, you sure you're not the avatar of some god of war?"

"Please, I'm just Erich. Fourth son to Johannes, a farmer in Konigstuhl canton."

I sheathed my sword with a smile. Although it had been made in a rush, the sheath was as excellent as the rest of the dvergar smith's work. There hadn't been a speck of spare metal or wood on the freshly sharpened blade, and the new cover was perfectly snug.

"In my opinion, I can't help but think the Smithing God has blessed *you* with his favor. Are you sure you don't have any divine blood?"

"Shut up, you brat. Don't go around throwing compliments that make people all fuzzy."

I felt invigorated. *Now then, tomorrow's the day. I better go help wipe*

the tears of our crying princess.

[Tips] A skilled blade can cut down any obstacle.

0.1 Hendersons

Henderson Scale 0.1

A derailing event that has no impact on the overarching story.

However, some small tangents can lead to bigger ones as the Henderson Scale spirals out of control...

Elisa was very sad and miserable. Her throat hurt from screaming, her eyes burned from crying, and she could barely feel her arms and legs due to her tantrum—but none of that could hold a candle to her melancholy.

Up until now, Elisa had never seen her wishes go unfulfilled. She would have understood if her wish was a bad one. Both her mama and papa were very kind, but they always scolded her when she did something wrong.

But this time, she could only wallow in her sadness and confusion. She wanted her papa to pat her head. She wanted her mama to squeeze her tight when she went to bed. She wanted to stay with her brother Heinz and his wife Mina, she wanted to play with the twins Michael and Hans, and she wanted them to help her get up on Holter's back. She wanted to see everyone in the village.

Was that so wrong?

Unable to understand, Elisa simply cried. Liquid emotion flowed from her eyes for so long that she wondered if she was going to run empty. The everyday life that she'd thought would go on forever was crumbling, and it was so, so scary. Angry and upset and frustrated, she couldn't stop crying.

Elisa was happy that her beloved brother Erich was coming with her. She liked it when he hugged her and said that he'd always stay by her side to protect her...but he could do that at home too. Rather, she had been happy *because* they were home.

All Elisa wanted was to live in her happy household with her kind brother to take care of her. She hated the college. She hated the red-robed lady that said strange things too. She didn't care about magic. She didn't want to live in a bigger, nicer house if it meant leaving home. All the cute clothes and tasty frozen treats in the world wouldn't want to make her leave.

The only thing Elisa ever asked for was to live happily with the people she loved. She wanted to live in their beautiful little house. Her

father was strong and kind; her mother was pretty and made yummy food; her brothers were funny and fun to play with; and she'd even gotten a new older sister who knew everything about fashion. Elisa had been *happy*.

What was more, she didn't want to leave behind all the friends that lived with her. The cute red lizard that lived in their stove always watched over the house and warmed Elisa up on cold nights. The big black puppy that came to their yard was a good boy who caught all the scary bugs and rats; whenever Elisa was home alone, he let her play with his big, bushy tail. The tiny, gentle girl in the corner of her room and the kind old man with snow-white hair listened to her stories for as long as she could talk.

Elisa didn't want to say goodbye to them either. They had been so kind to her.

The little girl's perspective was small and narrow: her kind family and friends were essentially her entire world. To be ripped away from them was akin to slicing up her soul and whisking each piece to a faraway land, never to be seen again.

It didn't matter how much she loved the brother that was to accompany her. It didn't matter that she'd been interested in the city ever since her father had told her stories about it. It didn't matter that she finally had a chance to ride a pretty stagecoach. She didn't want to go.

Alas, no matter how hard Elisa kicked or screamed, the day of departure arrived. Nothing could assuage her: not the beautiful clothes her mother had sewn her, nor her favorite ice candies, nor even Mina's hairpiece that she'd been given as a present.

"Elisa, it's okay. I'm right here with you."

Being picked up by her beloved brother usually made her feel so delighted, yet today all she could feel was dread. He was trying to take her someplace that she didn't want to go.

"No! Mr. Brother, I don't wanna. I like here."

Elisa had never realized before that it was so scary for her feet not to touch the ground. Despite her wishes, the exit to the home she thought she'd never leave fast approached.

"This is for your sake." Erich's stiff voice rang hollow as he spoke more to himself than to his sister.

Elisa had heard those same words ad nauseam over the last few days; once again they reared their ugly heads. She tightened her grip on her brother's new travel clothes. The sturdy linen was rough and hurt her face, but the warmth on the other side was all she had left in her world.

If all this really was for her sake, why was everyone doing something that made her so unhappy? Elisa could not grasp it.

“I promise to make it so you can come back here one day. Has Mr. Brother ever lied to you?”

The little girl could do nothing but cling to her brother and the promise he made.

[Tips] Fairies and spirits reside on a different plane of existence from fleshy mortals. Still, they are ever present despite their invisibility.

Seeing their youngest daughter cry surrounded by luggage, the family said their farewells with deep-seated shame.

Hanna wrapped her daughter's fingers around a bag of her favorite baked treats. Mina, the most recent addition to their family, took her well-worn hairpiece and pushed it into the girl's hair, knowing that Elisa had loved how pretty it was.

Heinz, the eldest son, wrapped Elisa up in a splendid cape so that she wouldn't get cold on her long journey. Michael and Hans handed her a full bag of her favorite fruits that they'd gathered from their local woods.

Johannes draped a necklace blessed by the God of Travels around his youngest's neck. He'd gone to the church and pleaded the bishop for it; one look at the silver plate fashioned to resemble a staff and boots was enough to tell that it had cost a hefty sum.

The charm had been granted power with a miracle. Any other traveler would have been ecstatic to receive such a gift, but the tears of a young girl cared not for such utility. Elisa clung to their legs, then the door, and then the fence in a desperate attempt to stay home, but at long last her brother managed to whisk her into the majestic carriage.

All that remained was a lonely family cursing their own powerlessness and a perplexed methuselah who watched them with curiosity.

“Well, worry not, I shall use my family name to protect her to the best of my ability. She is my official disciple and all.”

The magus truly could not comprehend them. She could not fathom what principle had brought tears to the parents' eyes, and the emotions of the brothers as they watched their siblings depart eluded her. Naturally so, as methuselah were made this way. Emotion had all but abandoned them, and their physical senses were dull. Surely, it all served to prevent the gradual erosion of self in the muddy stream of eternal life.

Mortal or otherwise, all sentient beings were in constant flux—emotions took new shapes by the time they even registered consciously. Methuselah could hardly care about anything outside of

the one interest that held firm on their souls.

In practice, this meant Agrippina could not make sense of familial love. Not to say that her own parents had abused her, of course. Perhaps one could argue that ferrying their newborn daughter across the world for a century was some form of mistreatment, but the evergreen knowledge she'd gained on her journey gleamed sharply in her mind to this day. As trade deals went, she considered it a win.

However, not once on their long excursion did she share a fatherly or motherly moment with her parents. They had never placed her on their laps like the children they'd seen on their travels; for her part, the thought of holding hands had never once crossed her mind. It went without saying that sleeping by her parents' side was unthinkable.

Their conversations never betrayed the manners of aristocracy: although they shared the unreserved frankness allowed between kin, their interactions were a far cry from any sensation of loving warmth.

Being the connoisseur of literature that she was, Agrippina had both a psychological understanding of the concept and an appreciation for it in fiction. Yet the emotion remained foreign to her own inner life. To try and think of a familial moment that she'd shared with her parents...took much deliberation; she could only drag up a few words of wisdom.

"Hide the dagger of knowledge in your mind always. This alone is your final resort; it is a weapon that no one can ever rob you of."

Agrippina's father had crammed her head full of all sorts of things about magic, cantrips, politics, economics... When he taught her anything, this was the maxim that accompanied it. She knew not whether he'd come up with it himself or inherited it from someone else, but these words alone had been engraved so deeply that she remembered them even now.

On second thought, perhaps this knowledge itself was its own kind of sentiment. Normally, nobles did not raise their own children—they could and did hire learned scholars to live with them and teach their progeny in their stead.

The du Stahl estate's fortune had been deemed "unappraisable" by the crown. Her father had clearly had the resources to buy an expert tutor to accompany them on their endless journey.

Yet Sir Stahl elected to educate his daughter personally. Not once did he let any others influence her mind.

How peculiar. It would seem I had already experienced a story of parental love, and quite intimately at that, Agrippina thought as she watched the family send their children off. In which case, perhaps the knowledge she would bestow upon the brother and sister would one day become emotion in its own right.

“I swear: I shall turn her into a splendid magus.”

No matter how small or niche the finding, it was always a joy to learn something new. Powerful sentiment arising from a situation like this was obvious to her and the world both, yet that did not take away from the fun of discovery.

Agrippina left the family to contemplate the subtle humor of her parting words as she retreated to her carriage. She activated a spell and the wheels began turning.

Finally, it was time for her long-awaited return. Her twenty-some-odd years of travel were coming to an end at last. To realize something new on such a joyous day was surely a sign: the trip home was bound to be full of wonderful discoveries.

The deadpan magus pushed her elation down; in place of a smile, she puffed a single cloud of smoke.

[Tips] In order to shrug off the chains of eternal life, many methuselah fill the deep recesses of their minds with fleeting, hedonistic thoughts.

Spring of the Twelfth Year (IV)

Non-Player Character (NPC)

A character controlled by the GM as opposed to one of the players. Unlike in console games, NPCs are still controlled by a person, but are considered “non-player” because they are not controlled by a literal “player.”

They act as quest givers, information sinks, helping hands along the journey, and more. They are both the damsel in distress that the session revolves around and the villains that kidnap her. They are the supporting cast and the antagonist—a party of protagonists alone does not a world make.

I could have saved face had I been a mage’s apprentice, but being a mage’s *servant* was exceptionally disappointing. The difference one word made was incredible.

I found myself in a pointlessly lavish room with these sorts of inconsequential thoughts passing through my mind. Elisa had finally fallen asleep in my arms after crying her heart out, so I laid her down in a chair.

“Hmm, how strange. I was under the impression that the opportunity to learn magic would put a twinkle in any child’s eye.”

Lady Agrippina, who had changed into a blue robe as luxurious as her first, stared at us curiously. *Don’t act like this isn’t your problem. She’s your disciple.*

“I believe it’s only natural for a young girl of seven to fear leaving her parents’ side,” I said.

“Children in the city often indenture themselves to merchants at the age of five, you know? You do know, don’t you, ‘Mr. Brother?’”

The mage took a seat as she mocked me. Her chair was cushioned beyond belief and overburdened with embellishments. That one piece of furniture probably cost as much as my house.

“That aside, this is so...incredible.”

I was hoping to change the subject and sidestep her banter. Any attempt to explain the emotional state of the average young servant who ran away out of homesickness was clearly futile.

Currently, we were in a room akin to a small salon. White wallpaper was interrupted by a chic circle of glass, and high pile carpet covered the floor. The table and chairs that lay atop it made it

difficult to believe that we were in a *carriage*. Forget hearing the constant clamor of wheels turning on a well-tread path—the vehicle didn’t so much as shake when we crossed a pothole. If I were to say that this was the magistrate’s tea room, I doubted there would be many who could see through my lie.

“But of course. I put a great deal of work into my carriage. Why should my quality of life have to suffer for the sake of boorish fieldwork? Well, truth be told, it *has* dropped quite substantially.”

The methuselah spoke as if she were reciting obvious platitudes. Honestly, it was no wonder to me now why they were so unpopular.

“Developing space-expanding magic is backbreaking work. So few people know how to use it that it was quite the ordeal to learn it myself. Still, it’s nice that the cost of maintenance is negligible—though I suppose I should expect no less from the methuselah of yore.”

This handmade carriage was a point of pride for Lady Agrippina. She went on to brag that it contained seven total rooms, which she could switch between at will. We were in a relaxing tea room now, but there was also a study, break room, and even a drawing room and kitchen that I suspected would never be used.

Essentially, it was a penthouse suite, no expenses spared. Long ago, I’d once ridiculed deluxe carriages as studio apartments on wheels, but to see that premise taken and run off with left me with mixed feelings.

This wagon alone could fit my house in it twice over. Mages truly were horrifying. Their hesitance to spread their craft made a lot of sense all of a sudden. Of course, my sister had left home specifically to learn this hidden art, but still.

On the day of our departure, we’d parted ways with the caravan that Lady Agrippina had been traveling with. (They’d desperately tried to retain their skilled travel companion, to no avail.) Instead, we set off straight for the imperial capital.

The capital of the Trialist Empire of Rhine, Berylin, was *not* the largest city in the empire. Between the imperial palace and the college, it was home to the centerpieces of power; however, the city had little in the way of industry outside of shopping and fiscal services. This was in part due to the routine rotation of the crown, but mainly stemmed from the fact that the population was very select. Most who settled down in Berylin were either nobles who had regular business in the palace, the retainers that served them, or merchants that dealt with the Imperial College.

The three imperial houses and seven electorate houses dictated the vast majority of politics in the empire. They most likely had written off a large urban center as unnecessary, as they all controlled

their own territories. Each region's cities were tailored to suit the local lord's interests or the area's culture. No one would pine for a massive metropolis that threatened to encroach on those privileges. The capital likely came about from shrewd political negotiation where each party tried to avoid yielding influence. As a result, the city towers high to this very day.

To reach the college, we had headed in the opposite direction from the caravans scattering to the distant reaches of the nation in search of new stock. The plan included stops at various inns along our journey; in fact, Lady Agrippina went out of her way to force these stops into our schedule every night, causing us to spend some days hardly moving. *Don't screw with me, woman.*

At our current pace, she told us that it would take three months for us to get to the capital. I couldn't help but feel listless when I thought that summer would arrive alongside us.

"I know it's cramped, but I ask that you put up with it. Who knows how many years I had to do the same."

If *this* was cramped, what words could describe the four beds lined up together that I'd shared with my siblings? The circumstances of birth were laughably unfair.

"With that said... Erich."

"At the ready," I said. I stepped away from Elisa and obediently waited on Lady Agrippina.

I intended to play the part of a dutiful servant as best I could. Despite recognizing that the slight pause that preceded my name had likely been the result of her trying to recall it, I didn't let any emotion show.

As an aside, we were now on our fourth day since meeting one another. It had taken her a long while to learn my name. She'd previously stated that remembering faces and names was not her forte; I believed this stemmed from a fundamental disinterest in other people.

"I plan to have you work as my servant, but at present that seems to be an inconvenient task."

"I...see?"

I had no idea what she meant by "inconvenient," but decided that it would be unwise to talk back to my employer. *Maybe she doesn't have any work clothes for me? Or perhaps she doesn't own any cleaning supplies.* That would indeed be inconvenient—I was less than keen on taking up the practices of a certain school where the toilets were cleaned with bare hands.

"So come on over here," she said, beckoning me to her.

I obeyed. She then made a cup with her right hand and exhaled into it, muttering something inaudible. Now that I thought of it,

methuselah didn't need catalysts to use magic, unlike mensch.

Thinking back on the few precious books about that I'd gotten a chance to read at the church, there were organisms that had an organ for discharging mana and those who didn't. Mensch fell into the latter category, meaning that we required some kind of conduit to draw out our magical power. On the other hand, methuselah fell into the former category: words or breath alone could be imbued with mystic energy, allowing them to cast their spells unassisted.

Lady Agrippina's breath swirled into a glowing vortex atop her palm. Just when I thought it had settled, it converged into a tiny droplet at the tip of her index finger.

"Now then, this may hurt, but be a dear and bear with me. You're a boy, aren't you?"

My head had been filled with moronic thoughts like *Wowee, sparkly! Pretty!* Yet her terrifying statement suddenly pulled me back to the moment. Before I could ask what she meant, her finger pressed against my forehead.

The world shattered.

In a word, I saw hell.

Over a lifetime as Erich, I'd endured my fair share of pain. I'd been bludgeoned with blunted iron training swords, fallen from tall trees, and been kicked through the air when Holter had been in a bad mood. All the usual injuries sustained by rural children were familiar to me.

As of late, I'd even been battered and bruised to the brink of death when I'd faced off against the kidnappers; as if to overwrite that pain, I had a vivid memory of the sensation of fangs tearing into the flesh of my ear.

However, none of that could compare. This new torment reduced all of that to a mere bug bite in scale.

It felt like bits of metal had been jammed into my skull only to suddenly expand; paradoxically, I could feel a vise grip crushing my brain. The backs of my eye sockets burned. I was made acutely aware of nerves that I had never before felt, as if somebody had yanked them out of my body to play cat's cradle.

The world spun, pain danced, and my senses twisted. The concept of "I" had been tossed into a blender and run through a hydraulic press; the remaining slurry was loaded into a compressor and dispersed on the four winds as fine particulate. "Pain" falls woefully short of conveying the experience.

Tormented by the illusion of eternal suffering, only a fraction of a second had passed in reality. Perhaps I had accidentally triggered my Lightning Reflexes amidst the agony, as I could see Lady Agrippina's eyes close in slow motion.

After a blink that had used up all the time in the universe, all that ailed me vanished.

“Hngh?!” Yet my body seized at the phantom sensation. I could feel my gut churn, threatening to rend my flesh asunder. Sullyng my master’s home (carriage, technically) was unthinkable, so I somehow held myself back through force of will. I’d been less than a moment away from reuniting with the wonderful meal that my mother had put her heart into making this morning.

“Well done and congratulations. Are your eyes open yet?”

As the pain subsided and I writhed to try and ask her what she’d done, the magus cut me off. Her words were accompanied by a pop-up in the corner of my vision. I’d awoken to my magical talents.

“Huh? Wha... What is this?”

I flipped through my stats in a frenzy to see that both Mana Capacity and Mana Output had little “Awoken” tags stuck to them. The magical traits that had refused to even budge in the past were now unlocked in spades. Many of the skills were still hidden away behind restrictions, but a few of these had opened up too.

What? What in the world happened?

“You’ve awoken to magic. Welcome to the world of magia.” Lady Agrippina puffed up her chest and smiled, ready for all the praise in the world.

Hold on a minute... Are you sure this was a good idea?

[Tips] Just as instruction can award experience points, the actions of others can also unlock various skills and traits. Experience is not consumed in this case.

Still battling the lingering pain, I was utterly confused as to what she’d done to me. Lady Agrippina casually began to leak the secrets of her inner clique—that is, the details of magical society.

“I informed you of what exactly a magus is when I invited you to serve me, did I not?”

Under normal conditions, this sort of information was kept from outsiders. However, I clearly needed to know if I was to work under her. She’d told me that mages recognized by the college were allowed to bear the title of magia. This distinguished them from mere mages or sorcerers.

Their fixation stemmed from the fact that they prided themselves on being able to choose between true and hedge magic to suit their situation. The word “mage” carried the connotation that one was a mere user of magic—and perhaps *only* magic.

Furthermore, the secrets behind spellcasting were tightly kept, but that didn’t mean they were completely unknown to the world at large.

Self-taught wizards could be found everywhere, using their skills to earn a living despite not even knowing the rigorous definitions that differentiated spells from cantrips. These grassroots mages simply awakened to their gifts naturally and manipulate mana through intuition alone.

Apparently, this talent for weaving magic into phenomena generally took form once the person crossed some threshold for Mana Capacity. They went on to learn how to control this power by themselves, lest they be overtaken by their own surging energy.

“It may seem complex to discern between true and hedge magics, but it isn’t a particularly daunting task. Regardless of the amount, all living beings contain mana. Naturally, our bodies are built to accommodate this ever-present resource.”

The magus listlessly puffed a cloud of smoke into the shape of a person walking through the air.

Mana was inherent to all sentient life. The average amount and utility differed between races, but you’d never find anyone without it. It followed that cases in which one’s body could not bear the load of something it was designed around were few and far between. Babies do not need to be taught how to breathe or suckle their mother’s teat. In parallel, an awakened mage would eventually amass at least some intuitive understanding of their powers. This was no different from a child’s first steps being eventually followed by running and jumping of all kinds.

“Yet that does not suffice.”

Another stream of smoke took the form of someone racing past the first figure, still walking leisurely.

“There is a sharp contrast between one whose legs flail about without direction and the deliberate movements of a sprinter. Magic must be refined.”

In essence, her analogy was that there were all sorts of nuances hidden away in the act of running. The time it took to get from point A to point B was not set in stone: a top runner with perfect form was hardly in the same realm as an amateur who knew nothing of balance. The efficiency that accompanied polish was just as present in magical exercise as physical.

And I could *see* the difference now. The unending bands and orbs of light clinging to the running smoke man were mana itself, neatly woven into a ritual spell that evaded the watchful eye of physics.

The other smoke man now flailed to catch up. Ugly clumps dotted the makeup of the spell. It was clear that the sprinter was indeed refined—I could see no excess parts in the flowing hex powering it.

Both spells achieved the same effect; yet one look was enough to tell there was a difference in their performance. Mana usage, casting

time, and the lag from the initial cast to activation all clearly pointed to one's superiority. My opened eyes let me see all that I needed to.

I never knew the world was so rational—so beautiful.

"Oh? It would seem you can discern the difference immediately after waking up. Commendable."

Lady Agrippina watched me stare at the elegant form of the second smoke man and smiled in satisfaction. Between the two solutions to the same problem, she seemed pleased that I had noticed which was to be preferred from a magus's perspective.

"Truth be told, you were quite peculiar. Imagine seeing a full-grown adult without a deformity in sight crawling about on all fours like a toddler. That was how you appeared to me."

That seemed about right. One was meant to get a grasp of their talents naturally at a certain point. A mensch with no inclination for the craft despite a V: Good capacity for mana would be sure to raise questions. This was the twist that had come with the future Buddha's blessing. I could do housework for the rest of my life, but would never get better at cleaning unless I explicitly chose to. To an outsider looking in, I was an irregularity, through and through.

Perhaps I'd piqued her interest as a talented individual not yet aware of my path to magehood. That may have been the reason I'd been chosen to accompany Elisa.

"Still, as peculiar as you once were, that was all there was to it. A tiny injection of priming mana was enough to open your eyes."

"What do you mean, 'open my eyes'?"

Lady Agrippina explained that the phrase was an idiom to suggest that one had awakened to their potential as a magus. Considering that I couldn't perceive the pretty sparkles of mana until moments ago, the metaphor was surprisingly straightforward.

Evidently, talent for spellcasting could come about naturally or be triggered by a magically provocative event. Like me, some realized their powers after an influx of another person's mana shocked their system. Others could experience similar episodes by venturing to a mana-rich location—these were usually spiritual, taboo, or holy.

But all this information still left me with one question.

"I take it you're wondering if it was all right to open your eyes so casually?"

I froze for a moment. She'd predicted exactly what I wanted to ask before I had even opened my mouth. I thought I'd had a perfect poker face; at most, I'd tilted my head by the faintest of angles.

I renewed my resolution to remain vigilant around my liege. Having my mind read off the back of every tiny movement would drive me to my wit's end.

"I told you this before, did I not? The title of magus is only a

necessity to those who wish to set up an official laboratory in the city or special cases like your sister. There are common folk who go about their lives using magic to earn their bread. No one will mind if one or two more happen to wake up and see their own aptitude. Provided I don't take you as an official disciple, of course."

Lady Agrippina laughed with a great air of ostentation and puffed on her pipe. Seeing her cackle, I finally understood: she hadn't just used me as an excuse to take Elisa as her apprentice... She'd done that, *and* earned herself a handy little manservant.

"At any rate, here. Read this."

She pulled a thickly bound book out of thin air (in the most literal sense) and tossed it to me, still laughing. I couldn't help but wonder just how many birds she'd managed to kill with one stone—as one of the casualties, I was overcome with an indescribable emotion.

I was happy that she'd primed me for sorcery. The self-study experience rates for magic as a category weren't too bad. Further, with the right add-ons, I could visualize a build based on various skills and traits that tickled my love of fixed values. The tantalizing thought of scouring through the newly unlocked pages of data already had me watering at the mouth. Still... *Man*.

"You *are* my servant, after all. I shall teach you just enough not to warrant tuition, so I look forward to seeing how you repay me. Let us begin with housework."

The fact that my powers were going to be put to use doing Lady Agrippina's bidding made it notably harder to celebrate. I thought back to the old mage and the five years I'd spent eagerly awaiting this day.

All that to amount to this?

[Tips] The gap between mage and magus is far greater than what the layperson assumes. Direct requests from magistrates only ever go to the latter, and they are the only ones licensed to advertise their businesses with magic lettering. All others simply fly under the radar—the state lets them swim, knowing that it would do more harm than good to crack down on every stray wizard.

What do you imagine when you hear the word magic? A scorching flame that burns enemies to nothing more than ashes? A tidal wave that washes away legions of helpless foot soldiers? A lightning bolt absolute that fells a giant foe? From a gamer's perspective, these spectacles are what I assume come to most people's minds.

There isn't anything wrong with that. My beloved tabletop games so often had combat systems crammed with rows and rows of

offensive spells, sometimes so densely they warranted a chapter of their own. Many of them were incredibly powerful, but could catch allies in the blast just as easily as they swept through enemies. The way they spurred on the imagination had a different flavor from video games, and they were always fun to play with.

Once, our front line had tunneled in on fire resistance, and I'd blown away everything in our path with no regard for friendly fire. Of course, that wasn't to say I hadn't regularly done the same with less resistant allies if the situation called for it.

Those had been the only times my dice dependably turned out high rolls. I reminisced on the times I'd gotten a cramp laughing about how my explosive dice roll demolished either me or my companions.

Regardless, TRPGs also included magic meant to be more useful in daily life. To take an example from a certain setting containing dragons and dungeons, there were spells to create energizing food and control the temperature of the space around oneself. These were the grounded types of spells that had made me wish for magic in my own life.

Other examples like temporary face shifting, water walking, and the like could single-handedly ruin the premise of entire campaigns. Although they could fail to deal even a single hit point of damage in regular use, even the most pointless spell could have a chance to shine in the right scenario. It was one of the biggest draws of fantasy systems.

The book I'd been given was chock-full of magic just as alluring. I knew from the first few minutes of flipping through the pages that this text was to be revered. It went without saying that it contained all sorts of cooking and cleaning magics for the menial tasks in life, but the table of contents alone listed tons of things that were rife for abuse.

Above all else, reading through the theory behind a given spell automatically unlocked it *and* awarded experience points. I was just about ready to begin worshipping this as a holy text, but...couldn't they have done something about the name? *One Thousand Spells to Keep the House in Order* wasn't exactly the most exhilarating title.

My enthusiasm for my first arcane textbook decelerated at the fact that I could imagine the subtitle *The Housewife's Bible* being added to the end. Regardless, my curiosity won out, and I carefully turned through the thick sheepskin pages.

Magic was certainly not a commonly studied subject, but the existence of this book pointed to that being untrue at the top echelons of society. Some of the occupational skills I'd unlocked corroborated this: there was an Arcane Attendant section that suggested that those serving the bourgeois could cast spells and cantrips themselves.

What this meant was that stewards of noble houses could be gifted magicians in their own right. Highborn life never ceased to surprise me.

That aside, I thought the manual was rather slim for its claim to contain a thousand spells. Yet upon closer inspection, the book itself was magically condensed; the page count extended well beyond the physical dimensions of the binding. *The contents are as plebeian as you can get, dammit. Who went out of their way to cast this fancy spell on it?*

“I leave the whole of housework to you. Hired help doesn’t live up to my standards, so I’ve been taking care of myself for some time, but it’s quite tiring, you see.”

Lady Agrippina wearily waved her hand and bid me away. I was to read through the book and report back to her when I came across a spell I deemed useful, at which point she would teach me how to actually use my mana.

I’ve thought of magic as this giant undertaking for so long... Am I really allowed to learn it this casually?

I set my doubts aside and ended up choosing a simple spell called Unseen Hand found in the preface of the book. The summary—which had been a horrendous read, laden as it was with metaphors and euphemisms in palatial and archaic tongues—stated that it was a beginner spell that allowed one to exert a nebulous force from afar in the form of a hand.

I figured its simplicity gave it perfect utility. I couldn’t even count how many times I’d dropped a spoon or something into a crack and struggled to reach it. And I’m sure everyone has prayed at least once for an extra hand to hold the last of their luggage. Most importantly, I could *touch things without using my real hand*. That was just begging to be twisted to my own ends.

“Oh, this? It must be so difficult to live as a mensch, having to learn how to use spells like these.”

Lady Agrippina slipped in an offhand violently racist remark and began to lecture. I’d spent a lot of resources bolstering my Memory, but I honestly would have liked a pen and paper. *Maybe I’ll ask for some later.*

At long last, we finally reached the question: what exactly was the difference between real magic and hedge magic? I initially worried that explanations given by a scholar like her would be difficult to follow. However, her lesson was surprisingly comprehensible.

“In effect, the world is a cloth woven from the strings of the gods.”

She began with an analogy—a suitable choice for teaching children. As she spoke, she plucked the top off a teapot that had been resting on the table.

“Take this lid. If I let go of this lid, it will fall back onto the table.”

The reality of gravitational attraction that we took for granted was not a physical phenomenon in this world. Gravity was instead attributed to the gods. After all, in those early days of existence, the heavens were said to have created the better part of the world as they pleased.

“If any given object exhausts the things beneath it upon which it can rest, it will eventually fall into the stars. This is a theory proposed by Elder Christof which we will take as our vertical thread.”

My instructor didn't bother to dwell on anything, but this theory being accepted meant that the denizens of this world had already adopted the notion that the planet was spherical. Come to think of it, I had never spoken about grand ideas about the planet or the like with anyone, and there weren't any scientific treatises kept in my church's storage. *I didn't think the world was this advanced!*

Oh, wait... Is it? On second thought, the philosophers of ancient Greece had come to this conclusion as well. If I discounted the Abrahamic religions that swept the globe, maybe it wasn't that impressive after all.

“What would happen if I were to swing it like a pendulum and then let go? But of course, it follows its momentum and flies away. This abides by the law of inertia set out by Robert of Ursov. We shall take this as our horizontal thread.”

The lecture went on, unbothered by the chatter in my brain. Lady Agrippina took the lid between her willowy fingers and hurled it across the room. I was thoroughly intimidated: had the carpet not been so shaggy, the delicate teaware would have been seriously damaged. The financial situation that fueled her lack of hesitation struck me with fear.

“The universe layers innumerable threads together to weave together what we know as ‘normal.’ That includes the magic that we use.”

This time, she lifted up the teapot itself. Without a moment's pause, she threw it too. The expensive-looking china...did not follow the “normal” path that was expected of it. Instead, it gently hovered to the floor like it had sprouted a set of wings.

“We take the spells we form with our mana and use them as needles and dyes, skipping stitches in the fabric of reality to fashion patterns of our choosing.”

The teapot came to a soft stop after drifting over to the lid that had preceded it. The reality before me was the result of phenomena that spat in the face of what was meant to be. I could tell that the magus's skill was immeasurable precisely because what she'd done was so difficult to wrap my mind around. This was on a different level

from shooting off fireworks or exploding pockets of air.

“Just now, I merely toyed with the two threads I mentioned that make up part of the world. I fooled reality into thinking that this teapot falls slowly.”

Although she made her incredible technique look almost cheap with an easily understood example, I managed to internalize just how unthinkable difficult it would be to get to the roots of the craft. Magic was intertwined with science—it was no doubt a path of scholarship to the highest degree. *No wonder the state built a giant research institute to get all the geniuses in the empire to dedicate their lives to this.*

“In contrast, science is the endeavor of attempting to perfectly imitate a cut of cloth woven from the magical fibers of reality. Thus, the consequences that we bring about hold until the cloth eventually shrinks and disappears.”

The teaware floated up and returned to its original position. When the lid found its spot with a soft click, Lady Agrippina smiled so brilliantly that it was a shame there wasn't a painter on hand to immortalize it. She retained her beaming face as she made her concluding remark.

“See? Isn't it simple?”

The hell it is!

Reason beat down my urge to scream and I managed to instead thank her for the well-presented lecture. From there, we moved on to emitting and manipulating mana.

If reality was but a cloth, then mana was the sewing kit stored in one's body. It piled up until one's Mana Capacity was reached, and one could let loose an amount dictated by their Mana Output. To use another analogy, one's capacity represented a tank of water, and output could dictate the difference between a gardener's hose and a fireman's.

I had thankfully leveled both to V: Good, but I imagined that a lopsided ratio would be agonizing. I pitied the mages out there who drew an unlucky lot.

“Spells are something you ought to work out in your head, but spoken chants can help solidify the image in your mind. Complicated procedures sometimes require body movement, as well, but as a general rule you should hope to come up with the spell and simply let it activate through a conduit. Of course, I would never deny that chants, movements, and even magic circles drawn on paper can help bolster your power or accuracy.”

My sympathy for hypothetical people did me no favors as she briskly pressed on. *Interesting. So chants and magic circles are training wheels that eventually become a booster of sorts.*

As one might expect, the underlying rationale behind long-winded

mantras and sparkly light was not to look cool—which meant that I could unleash my inner middle school boy and it would be considered good form.

“At times, you may consider using a formal catalyst, but... Well, we shall leave higher-end topics for another day. Now let me see...”

“Wha—hey! What are you—”

I don’t know whether or not she picked up on my boneheaded thoughts, but Lady Agrippina thrust her hand down my collar out of nowhere. I’d been so focused on the lesson that my reactions were a beat late. I had no hope of stopping her as she ruffled around my chest.

When she withdrew her hand from my travel clothes, it reappeared with a ring. I’d kept the old mage’s ring dangling from my neck at all times since he’d given me it all those years ago.

I’m pretty sure this could be considered sexual harassment. Had I been a girl, the whole scene would have been cast in a...let’s say *less than printable* light, outside of a thin and expensive format at certain fan gatherings.

“Ah, I knew you had something. My, this is far nicer than I would have expected.”

The magus peered at the ring with a piece of cord fed through it and muttered her first impressions. She pulled it closer to get a better look, so I leaned forward to make sure the string wouldn’t catch on my neck—only to witness a set of dainty fingers pluck the thing right off.

“Huh?!”

“This sort of thing is a rare sight nowadays. Where did you get your hands on it?”

My disbelief dragged my mental capacity through the mud, but I somehow managed to work my tongue-tied mouth long enough to recount my encounter with the old man. I’d witnessed physics-defying events at an alarming frequency with little ado ever since I’d gotten involved with Lady Agrippina. This was not good for my psyche.

At the very least, would it be too much to ask that she put more hurrah into it, like the church ceremonies held by my hometown bishop? Then my brain could shift gears and accept the hocus-pocus of it.

“What a generous magus... To think he’d give away a lunar ring.”

“What does that mean?”

“The material used to craft these is rare. That being said, its rarity is all there is to note; the trend for the past century or so is to forgo ease of use in favor of raw power. Still, this has its uses as an uncomplicated conductor for mana.”

Lady Agrippina returned the ring to me after her appraisal.

Apparently, this would do in place of a staff.

Arcane conduits generally required tedious operation or were large and bulky in the name of transferring mana more smoothly. Thinking back, the old man had carried around a staff that was far too large to hide.

Evidently my ring was ill-suited for powerful spells. Still, it was solid enough to be used for most purposes, which was why she'd called the old magus generous. It looked like I really had received a wonderful gift.

This was exactly what a magic swordsman would need. It conducted mana but didn't even take up a hand, leaving me free to cast spells with a firm grip on my sword. The direction of my build was rapidly coming together. Instead of being a magic swordsman that used spells and then swung, I was going to aim for a style where I wove magic into my swordplay.

While these two paradigms sounded similar, they were stylistically distinct. The former used magic at mid-to-long ranges and switched to swordplay in close quarters. Like a Roman legionary throwing his spear before charging into the fray, in this archetype magic was a tool to soften up one's opponents. From there, one could stack buffs and jump into the melee or pull back to cover holes in the rear guard. It was a role that could do anything a party needed. As hackneyed as this may sound, this flexibility made them masters of nothing, and I had many memories of struggling to make similar builds work.

It was simply too easy to fall into the classic jack-of-all-trades role. When I'd faced a warrior who'd single-mindedly devoted their experience to their class, I hadn't been able to land *or* dodge a hit properly, and my squishy, untrained flesh had been the stuff of tears. Compared to mages of equal level, the experience I'd wasted on warrior skills had left my magic stats woefully inadequate.

The only ways to make this archetype worth using were to spend a ludicrous amount of experience, or to have a perfect set of racial bonuses for the task.

In contrast, the style I wanted to pursue was a sub-archetype that revolved around breaking the action economy over my knee. I would fit in small spells as bonus actions while speccing as a full-fledged frontliner. Here, magic was the seasoning on top; I would only pick up the bare minimum I needed on the arcane side of things. Instead of throwing around flashy direct-damage spells, imagine calling a glowing sword from a galaxy far, far away to slice opponents into pieces.

You may think that this would make this build easier to put together, but that wasn't at all the case. Even the slightest error in balancing out my resources between magic and swordsmanship could

leave me at the whims of proper front-guard fighters. The challenge that came from finding this impeccable ratio plucked at my munchkin heartstrings. At the end of a long battle with calculations, there was nothing more cathartic than slamming down big numbers on a crowd of brain-dead warriors who'd jammed all their resources into warrior skills.

All that said, I took a step back to examine myself in terms of game balance. I could enter combat, set up with Lightning Reflexes, fire off a spell with my extra action, and then take a full normal turn. This was ludicrous. I was the type of front guard that I dreaded seeing from the GM's seat.

I could see a future where I began combat by buffing my party and debuffing the enemy, throwing a hex on the back line if line of sight allowed it. My unfair schemes were a reflection of my personality; this skipped past strong and went straight to oppressive.

GMing for a clever gremlin with ludicrous offensive ability is exhausting, since it severely limits the range of viable combat encounters. If they got too strong and somehow slipped through to behead the backline enemies, the whole encounter would fall to pieces. A GM's job is, in part, to set up fights the players can win; making it still feel like a challenge is where the struggle comes from.

On the player's end, though, there's nothing better than bulldozing right through the GM's carefully planned work! Take the initiative when it comes to bullying your GM!

Now that I had a real idea of how I could min-max myself, I was getting excited. Without any delay, I acquired Unseen Hand while listening to Lady Agrippina explain how I ought to organize my mana.

I once again marveled at how efficient it was to be taught something. A free unlock was par for the course, and lessons came with an experience discount to actually acquire the skill. Furthermore, the experience I earned while learning ended up returning a net profit. My blessing was utterly busted.

For now, I elected to raise the spell to III: Apprentice and obediently began forming an image in my mind. I felt a strange and novel sensation wriggling within me, conglomerating into a single mass. The process grew fiercer and fiercer until the mystic body flowed out of the ring on my left middle finger.

It dribbled out of the conduit as a band of light before demonstrating the behavior that I had programmed it to do. My target was the string still draped around my neck. Now that I no longer had a need for it, I wanted to remove it. As soon as I focused my attention, the Unseen Hand bent to my will and removed the string, holding it up in front of me.

So this is magic! The result was simple and boring, but seeing my

spell take effect was enough to deeply move me. This was what I had been searching for! *How grand!*

“Wow, on your first try? Not bad at all.”

While I was busy throwing together enough mental applause to produce cosmic noise, Lady Agrippina caught me off guard with words of praise. Methuselah could use this sort of spell off instinct alone, but she knew—or rather, she reasoned out at this very moment—that mensch children were not the same.

In the time that I’d taken to acquire the skill, she’d been lost in thought—she’d reevaluated the difficulty of training a mensch based on the fact that I couldn’t even use a spell like Unseen Hand. Yet evidently, I’d managed to surpass her expectations, if only slightly.

“Good boy, good boy... This *is* what I’m meant to do, isn’t it?”

Lady Agrippina awkwardly placed her hand on my head and petted me, trying to figure out how an instructor was meant to carry herself. It was clear from her question that she wasn’t very good with children, owing to a dearth of experience.

I couldn’t help but feel guilty for some of the vengeful things I’d fantasized about in our short time together. They had been a touch too gruesome to put to writing, so I simply resolved myself to apologize through honest work. That wasn’t to say that I reconsidered my opinion of her. And I completely deny that having my head patted for the first time in a while swayed me in any way.

“Very good. Go along and practice by yourself for a time. I’m sure we’ll arrive at the inn by sunset, so I’ll be off reading.”

I bowed my head as she returned to her little world and prepared to immerse myself in my own.

[Tips] Some abilities can only be unlocked by being taught, and many receive acquisition discounts in the presence of a tutor. This effect is most pronounced with magic and other scholarly pursuits.

The clever boy may be able to work toward things he has yet to learn, but all the wits in the world aren’t enough to unlock something he doesn’t know exists.

The genius researcher of the Imperial College glanced up from her book for a brief moment. She saw that her apprentice had immediately begun to sniffle upon waking up, and her servant moved in, frantically trying to appease her. Even as she dropped her gaze back to the text in her hands, several threads of parallel thought blazed in her mind.

This was what made the methuselah the preeminent humanfolk. In terms of physical specifications or magical affinity alone, there

were races that matched or at times even surpassed them.

Although they were on the brink of extinction following a deadly plague that had wiped out most of their population, the old giants still reigned over the sacrosanct mountain peaks that pierced the clouds.

The nephilim inherited the blood of divine avatars who'd descended eons ago. Their every breath wrought miracles upon the land.

Great fairies were living manifestations of various eternal phenomena of this reality and controlled nature as they saw fit.

Lastly, the only beings that could destroy a vampire for good were the gods themselves.

Besides these examples, there were countless other races that posed a legitimate threat to methuselah in a contest of tenacity or magical talent. All one needed to do to kill a methuselah was part head from body—in a way, they were one of the most modest races around.

Yet despite all their fellow humanfolk antagonizing them as a thorn in their sides, the methuselah did not crumble. Quite the opposite—they went around dancing to their own tune to this very day.

The reason was simple: methuselah were naturally born multitaskers. They could simultaneously process a second and third unrelated task at any given time. While their bodies went through their daily affairs on autopilot, they could ceaselessly devote themselves to lofty contemplation. Whether they were a scholar or a politician, a tactician or a strategist, this was a fearsome power to behold.

From the concurrent, overlapping revelations in their mind, they could predict things to an unreasonable degree of precision. Able to pit two arguments against one another fairly, it was as if their minds were a constant battleground for debate. Paired with their tendency toward monomaniacal fixation, their expert calculations ascended to the realm of prophecy. To rob such a being of its life through skill in combat alone was a daunting task.

Agrippina was using her racial specialty to the best of her ability as she pondered the future of the two children.

The brother was a far better learner than she'd expected. Still, he was nothing more than an outlier; his case alone would not be enough to improve her opinion of mensch capabilities in general.

The more imperative matter was that the toddler-like sister would need time before she was ready to learn anything. It would smooth things along if she remembered her true identity as a changeling. In the event that she did, manipulating magic would come to her more easily than breathing air.

However, that alone would not do; that alone did not suffice; that alone would fall short of their goal. The college demanded logic, not technique. Only when bound by reason and refined by the whetstone of theory could magic be considered Truth—something worthy of being passed down to those who would carry the torch.

Mere usage would do the girl no favors. To wield the awesome power of her birthright was no different than a freshly born babe swinging around a stick. Generations to come had nothing to glean from such trifles.

There was no need for eminence that died with its wielder. This precept was grander than the college; it was the collective will of the empire itself. Society did not pine for a fleeting splendor that bloomed and withered in a single generation. Slow and steady expansion of prosperity was venerated above all else. Otherwise, the nation would not have elections for its emperors. The very foundation of Rhine spat in the face of the egocentrism of monarchy.

It was a matter of course that the college did not favor mages for their might. Such clowns would never be permitted to carry themselves as magia. Agrippina's disciple would never graduate with her mind as innocent as it currently was.

Come to think of it, the methuselah recollected that a man had once barged in to boast about the gift of magic he'd been born with. The episode clung tight in a corner of her flawless memory. *What was his name?* Though her kind hardly ever engaged in the act of forgetting, things that didn't hold their interest were difficult to bring back to the surface. That was why it had taken Agrippina some time to be able to smoothly recall her apprentice's and servant's names.

Truth be told, the man from however many years ago had been quite the impressive sorcerer. It had taken the brilliant Agrippina until adulthood to begin learning space alteration magic. The fact that he'd taken the first step already had left her genuinely amazed. She remembered thinking that these unpredictable bundles of raw potential ready to burst that popped up now and again among mensch were the reason they couldn't be underestimated as a whole.

However, said in a different light, that was *all* he had amounted to. He'd failed to properly explain the intricacies of his marvelous technique. Agrippina hadn't felt even remotely curious at a man whose only trick was to flex his natural talent. She'd wondered, *If you can do no more than brandish your innate endowments, what difference is there between you and a beast?*

At the very least, there would have been *something* of interest had he carried some grand ambition to fulfill with his gift. Yet the profound eyes of the magus had fallen upon a child seeking approval. His future at the college had been beyond hope.

Even so, there had been a chance that he'd be of some use, perhaps as a businessman or a data collector. Alas, the Imperial College was the pinnacle of magic. Those who walked its halls were broken and complete, and they would be sure to deem him as worthless.

Agrippina thought that she'd explained all of this to the man very cordially and with great detail. Yet he had failed to cede, and the only reason she'd written him a letter of recommendation was to get the stubborn fool out of her hair.

This had led to her receiving a strongly worded letter that read, "Don't send us your garbage."

Not that she particularly cared. She'd put this behind her, and it was hardly worth dedicating any of her precious brainpower to reminiscence. With his skills, the mage had likely gone on to be a successful mage in some city, so she offered a light prayer that he might mature and put the subject to rest.

Agrippina needed to raise her apprentice to be the opposite of that buffoon. She needed to mold Elisa into a proper thinker. That was the responsibility she had taken on in deciding to take in a student.

Now, how long would it take to teach Elisa how to read and write to a level where she could navigate a treatise? How much longer to cultivate the logic and deduction needed to write one of her own?

When Agrippina thought of the road ahead...a faint smile graced her lips. So long as she had a disciple, she was free from fieldwork! Those who shouldered responsibility were granted privilege. In the name of dedicating all her time to the education of her apprentice, Agrippina could free herself from all sorts of bothersome tasks!

With a notably brutish thought swirling around in her mind, Agrippina wondered how the dean of her cadre would react when she returned. She was at the edge of her seat in excitement. What was more, silent rage filled the space between the lines of the dean's reply to her letter that she'd sent two days prior. Her superior's reaction was guaranteed to be priceless.

Agrippina du Stahl, noble daughter of the Stahl Barony, internally mocked the dean and began to plot. *Where shall I start?* Her byzantine and horribly inconsequential scheme started to take form.

[Tips] The highest rank within the Imperial College is that of a professor, and a council of them manage the institute's affairs. To join its ranks, one must prove that their true nature is worthy of the honor.

Spring of the Twelfth Year (V)

Connection

A special NPC that is either officially written into the handbook or specifically prepared by the GM. Boasting detailed backstories and in-game data, these characters have the power to influence the campaign.

At times they help the PCs as guides to move the story forward. At others, they become enemies to cross swords with.

Some systems have connection characters so infamous that their appearance alone can be enough to hazard a guess at future developments and twists.

To pacify a child whose mood has soured is an onerous task.

I dragged myself along like a bag full of lead and rested my legs by the stable next to our inn. More precisely, I hurled my body onto the floor in exhaustion. My duties as a servant had no hand in my crushing fatigue; feeding our steeds and carrying luggage from the carriage was not at all tiring. I'd spent enough time and experience points building up a farmer's body to not buckle at this kind of chore.

My exhaustion was purely emotional. I'd been too frantic in my attempts to assuage the never-ending tantrums of my little princess.

Lady Agrippina had completely ignored several inns on our way to this one, likely owing to the fact that it was a glorious place catering toward the upper class, where lodging alone was paid for in the order of silver pieces. Food services were purchased separately, and this too unabashedly cost another few silver, as if this sort of pricing was the proprietor's god-given right. It was easy enough to tell that commoners like us weren't welcome here.

To put this into perspective, I could stay two whole nights at a cheaper inn for a copper quarter so long as I managed my own meals. I could only imagine how nice it was to be wealthy.

At any rate, Elisa's temper had come to a head at suppertime. Being a servant, I'd refrained from sitting at the same table as my master in an attempt at prudence. Truth be told, the real reason was that I could tell at a glance that the food was laden with fats, and I knew it wouldn't suit my palate—both my past and current lives had been spent growing up in a household that preferred lighter tastes.

However, this did not sit well with Elisa. Her outburst could only

be described as an explosion of emotion, and her crying had made it difficult to understand why she was so upset. I eventually managed to decipher that she couldn't comprehend why the only member of her family by her side couldn't even sit with her at dinner.

Elisa loved mealtime at home more than anything else: that was when we were all together.

Lady Agrippina had planned to teach her table manners while they ate, but balked in the face of Elisa's unstoppable sobbing and permitted me to join them. Although my liege never once broke her noble veil, it was clear she was contemplating how difficult the road ahead looked to be. I couldn't help but feel a smidge bad.

Soothing Elisa while sampling foods that didn't suit my tongue had been strenuous. Also, I'd realized I was as in need of a lesson in table manners as my sister. We'd been the only ones dining there today, but at this rate we were sure to cause trouble for people around us in the future. I wouldn't last long as a servant if I threw dirt on my master's name.

I'd finally been freed once I'd somehow managed to put Elisa to bed. Perhaps out of good will—though it was far more likely that she simply wanted to sleep on her own terms—Lady Agrippina had rented two rooms, giving me some space for comfort. Still, I simply couldn't get in the mood to doze off.

"This is rough," I said, heaving a heavy sigh.

My long-lost habit of talking to myself reared its head. When I'd lived alone in my past life, I'd spoken to myself so much that it must have seemed like I had an invisible roommate. Yet my constant company in this world had never given me a chance to do so.

I loved Elisa—I truly did. But that didn't make this any less arduous. I prayed that she might settle down a little eventually, but if things went on as they were, my life was slated to be nigh unmanageable. Lady Agrippina had seemed to form some kind of plan, evidenced by the fact that she'd provided verbal covering fire partway through dinner. Hopefully that would be enough to form some kind of bond with Elisa, which would be the best for all of us.

If a student and master don't see eye to eye, the process of learning is all but doomed.

I gazed up at the sky to try and refresh myself...only to question whether the intense pain of this afternoon had bugged out my eyesight. There were *two* moons.

The two celestial bodies floated a short distance apart in the heavens. The first emitted the familiar white glow of a gentle moon—the physical manifestation of the kind Mother Goddess who ruled over the night, worshipped by many in our nation. The crescent visage of the Rhinian pantheon's grand dame was well guarded by her

twinkling retainers. Tonight, like every night, she bathed the earth with a beautiful, benevolent light.

On the other hand, the second moon was pitch-black, steeped in ill omen. Darker than the black of night, it looked like a hole had been cut out of the sky itself. Its macabre lightlessness was so absolute that it would stick out even on an unlit night of a new moon. Despite embodying darkness, it had an inexplicable glow.

The two lunar orbs mirrored one another: for as full as the white moon was, the black moon had lost an equal amount.

What... What is that? Is this the answer to the question the old man asked? "How many moons are there?"

It had a strange allure to it—the moon was *enchanted*. The hollow cutout in the sky was a void that threatened to swallow everything whole; it was a bell-mouth spillway, hiding its tremendous capacity for violence deep within. The horror of it gave birth to a sublime sense of beauty. If I continued to watch, I had a feeling that the heavens and earth would flip, with all the world falling in.

The most terrifying part was that my horror was accompanied by an uncontrollable part of my soul telling me that the phenomenon was comfortable. Somewhere within, I knew that a journey to the other side would never let me return—yet that same part *wanted to go*.

"I wouldn't recommend staring for too long."

A quiet voice rang out like a bell. The dainty tone of a young girl was accompanied by a sweet scent wafting from behind my shoulder.

I couldn't believe it. My Presence Detection was polished enough to pick up on the ever-elusive Margit, yet I hadn't noticed a thing. Still, my body refused to freeze in surprise and leapt forward on pure reflex. I tumbled and used the momentum of my roll to pivot on my landing foot. With a flawless full-speed turn, I found myself facing a strange girl.

Unlike the majority of people in the region, she had dark skin. Her age and height didn't differ much from my own, though the long hair she wore like clothing reflected the luster of the moon, drawing my eye.

Why? Why am I surrounded by girls so full of vitality?

Alas, this was no time to be joking around. I mean, *come on*, she was plainly bad news. I'd been gazing up at a horrific moon on a ghastly night only for her to appear and provide running commentary. To make matters worse, she managed to sneak past my senses. This girl was anything but normal.

"I'm hurt," she said. "And here I'd come to caution you."

When she saw me crouch down to prepare for potential combat, the girl's charming and refreshing smile scrunched up into a frown. *Hey, quit that. Daintily playing with your hair like the maiden you are is*

all well and good, but you're showing things that you aren't meant to show.

"Who might you be?" I asked, maintaining my posture. Judging from the fact that she bothered calling out to me, I could tell she didn't mean any harm. Unfortunately, ill intent was far from prerequisite to death in this world. That was doubly true for an incomplete child like me.

Furthermore, I could feel something with my newfound sense for magic. Waves of immense power radiated off of her—no, she *was* the power.

"Me? I'm a svartalf, a fairy of the night. Nice to meet you, o Beloved One."

"An *alf*?"



I thought that the title fit her perfectly: the idea permeated into my skull and my mind accepted it straightaway. Her flesh was supple, despite her young appearance; her skin glowed dimly beneath the night sky; her hair was crafted from a chunk of the white moon itself; and her blood-red eyes spoke of an overwhelming existence that no humanfolk could match.

"I apologize if I frightened you. I just couldn't help myself when I saw your beautiful golden hair."

Her saddened expression once again flipped to a smile as she took a step toward me in the dark. Freed from the shadows of the barn, her moonlit figure only strengthened her mystic charm.

"My hair?"

"Indeed. You have been endowed with looks especially pleasing to alfish tastes. For a boy, your locks are rather soft and have a sweet odor to them."

Her stride was so natural that I couldn't process that her foot had left the ground, let alone that it had landed. My eyes registered her approach, but a haze obscured my mind and prevented me from grasping what had happened. I'd been holding a work knife behind my back this entire time, but I didn't notice she'd entered striking distance until she had already touched my cheek.

"Wha?!"

"What do you say? Shall we dance? The moon is stunning tonight, Beloved One."

Her hand was cold against my skin. Even knowing the cool sensation of an arachne's touch, her palm was like ice. She brushed her shapely fingers up past my cheek and pushed up my hair affectionately. I couldn't stop her. No, for some reason, a part of me didn't *want* to stop her.

"Now, take my hand. And then, won't you tell me your name?" She pushed back my bangs to expose my ear and whispered at point-blank range. Without any conscious thought, my lips began to move...

"Leave it at that."

A violent gust of wind brought me back to my senses. I whirled around to see that reality had torn open like an old cloth, and Lady Agrippina sat on the edge of the tear in her nightgown. The impeccably tied bun she wore in the daytime now flowed freely; paired with the thin silk clinging seductively to her figure and the entrancing moonlight, she looked like a masterwork of art come to life.

"This boy is my servant. I won't have him whisked away just as I begin drilling some sense into him."

A handful of terrifying black orbs floated listlessly around her—

some combat spell, most likely. At my current level, I only had an aesthetic appreciation for it, but the tingling sensation of mana on my skin let me know that those were anything but the result of a peaceful spell. The kidnapper had been moments away from hitting me with something similar, but his version had been a cute trifle compared to these things' overwhelming aura. *This is not normal.*

"Oh my," the fairy said. "What a shame to run into a boorish methuselah on such a splendid night."

Horribly, the alf remained calm, not letting me on to her true strength. She simply toyed with my hair, her laughter akin to the chimes of a rolling bell.

A long moment passed. Only the crackling of spells ready to fire echoed through the night air. Stuck between two monoliths of magical power, I was hideously uncomfortable for the entire duration; I worried my heart was going to shrivel up. *I wonder if I can just run away at full speed and make it out alive...*

However, the conclusion to this drawn-out scene never came to be, and the fairy stepped away of her own volition. With the same imperceptible movements as before, she left my side, but not before leaving something in my hair.

"My fun has been thoroughly spoiled," she said. "Let us meet again, on another night with a beautiful moon."

Leaving only reverberating laughter behind, the alf melted into the night. At long last, silence took hold of the scene.

"My goodness," Lady Agrippina spat. "As predisposed as you may have been, the *night of*? To think this would happen on the very day you learned to see. Give me a break, will you?"

She abandoned all pretext of dignity and hopped down from the tear in reality with an ignoble grunt. She walked over on her bare feet—actually, on closer inspection she was hovering just above the ground—and wadded up her hair wearily.

"Thank...you very much?"

Alas, I was still utterly lost as to what happened, and my words of gratitude inflected upward as a result. *Did she...save me?*

"Act with more care. Alfar dote on mensch in particular, and it would be quite the ordeal should they manage to take you."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked worriedly.

The horrifying answer that I received was that I would be brought to dance with them in a never-ending twilight. *I knew she was bad news! Am I cursed? Why are all my encounters with terrifying young girls that have a screw loose?!*

"The great majority of mensch don't have the capacity to see fairies, you see. Even those with open eyes often fail to recognize them due to matters of the spirit. When an alf finds one that will

entertain their conversations, they tend to excitedly involve themselves with their mark.”

What the heck? These fairies were no better than the random mobs in RPGs that picked a fight as soon as the player walked into view. Did this mean that an *entire race* of supernatural beings was out to get me?

“And plus, your hair...and eyes...”

When I’d first met Lady Agrippina, she’d said something about how fairies loved blonde hair and blue eyes when explaining Elisa’s situation, but I didn’t know it was *this* bad. Being kidnapped and held captive forever was no joke. Obsessive love interests were fun to read about in fiction, but were a completely separate beast when they were stalking me personally.

“Well, worry not; I shall teach you how to deal with your fey troubles. Get some rest for tonight. Unripe mages ought not to loiter about on nights when the False Moon shines with vigor.”

“The False Moon?”

“You see the dark lunar body floating in the sky? That is the moon’s shadow. Just as the true moon reflects the sun’s light, this secondary figure is the reflection of formless mana weaving together into a paradoxical, imaginary cavity. The moon’s excess is pure poison for mortals.”

I finally knew the identity of the fuligin vortex of nothingness in the sky. It had many names: the False Moon, the Hollow Moon, and Imaginary Matter to list a few. Not even the brilliant minds of the college who aimed to approach the root of all magic could uncover its finer details.

The only thing that was certain was that it waxed as its twin moon waned, and the saturation of magical energy in the environment waxed and waned alongside it.

“Hurry along to bed. If the little princess wakes to see that her knight in shining armor is missing, we’re sure to be in for quite the waterworks. I’m sleepy, and will retire myself. ‘Night.”

Lady Agrippina lethargically bid me adieu and fell backward, diving into a space-time tear just like the one she came from. Her angle of entry made it obvious that it led straight to her bed.

“That spell sure is nice,” I mumbled to myself in an attempt to distract my mind from reality, but suddenly remembered that the fairy had left something in my hair. I gingerly plucked it out to find a single flower.

It was a rose whose bud had just broken, with petals a gorgeous purple so deep it was nearly black. The faint red along the edges completed it nicely; the whole was as beautiful as it was orphic—a spitting image of the girl who’d given it to me.

Once again, I'd been given quite the fateful item. This was absolutely the type of thing where I would meet a horrible demise if I dared to throw it away. *Wait, is getting rid of it even possible?*

With all sorts of foreshadowed story beats pounding in my head, I sighed, my breath infused with utter cheerlessness.

[Tips] Flowers have meanings to alfar. A black rose signifies that “you are mine,” but the Trialist Empire has yet to develop flower language.

The next day, the party of three changed their original plans and stayed another night at the same inn, due to the fickle weather of early spring: lightning and plentiful rain staked their claim on the southern reach of the empire. The Harvest Goddess had awoken; Her husband the Storm God and Their numerous sons and daughters let Their merriment get out of hand.

With limited visibility and uncooperative horses, Agrippina decided her unhurried journey would not suffer because of a delayed departure. Besides, venturing forth when the gods were excitable was ill-advised in any land, near or far. Instead, the methuselah had erected a barrier to escape the noise of the divine banquet and bid Elisa alone into her silent room.

Thus began their first-ever lecture. It was unambiguous that Elisa was still not in the best of moods as she cast an eye of suspicion on her master. She'd been pulled away from her brother and her attitude skipped straight past cloudy to mimic the raging tempest outside.

“Now then, let me start with something simple. Something that will make you want to try your very best.” Yet Agrippina didn't mind her student's disrespectful demeanor in the slightest. She was practically singing as she spoke. “My girl, you know what alfar are, don't you?”

“Alver?”

“Yes, yes, *alfar*—spirits, if you'd like. Say, a lizard who hides away in the fireplace to protect its warm flame. Or a young girl and old man who live beside you. Or perhaps a black dog who runs around your yard. These are your friendly neighbors who are invisible to all but you. Or am I mistaken?”

At this query, Elisa finally showed something that could be described as compliance. She nodded her head in affirmation.

“Friends.”

“Ah, precisely. Your friends. And Elisa, you love your brother Erich, don't you?”

This question also got an easy, predictable nod from the girl. As she nodded over and over, she suddenly remembered that her brother

wasn't present and nearly began to cry. Being taken away from her home was lonely enough, but to not have her dear brother by her side left her at a loss for what to do.

Elisa was as anxious as when she'd first awoken in the kidnapper's carriage. If someone didn't come save her soon, she was going to die.

"You see, Elisa, it would seem that your little friends love your brother, just like you."

"Huh?!"

"Do you know of a dark-skinned girl with white hair?"

Elisa hesitated for a few seconds, but eventually decided that she would answer honestly. For whatever reason, she had a feeling that if she ignored this annoying lady's question here, she would suffer some kind of fatal loss.

"I do. Sometimes she says mean things. Like, 'You can't be up so late.' But, but! Sometimes she helps me go potty at night when it's scary."

This meant Elisa knew of svartalfar. There wasn't necessarily any guarantee that she'd met the same individual, though, as they were spread throughout the land.

"I don't know if it was the same girl, but yesterday a black-and-white little girl came to invite your brother to play, you know? She wanted to take him far, far away."

With a thin smile, Agrippina fanned the flames of Elisa's fear.

"No!!!"

The changeling shot to her feet with enough force to kick back her chair and lunged for her master. In turn, the methuselah avoided her disciple's attack with a light step to the side. Elisa lost her footing and hit the ground hard; her sniffles signaled that she was about to cry. The woman did nothing.

"You don't want him to go, do you? Of course you don't. But your dear brother is going to be snatched away."

"No! No!!! You can't take Mr. Brother!"

"Really, now? You don't want to lose him?"

Elisa's harsh screams began to strain her vocal cords. After all that had happened, to lose her brother now would leave her utterly alone. That was so scary, so unsettling, and so hopeless that she couldn't contain herself.

Agrippina leisurely walked over to Elisa as she screamed "No!" over and over.

"I see. Then I shall teach you how to make sure he doesn't get taken," she said, as tenderly as she could. Her honeyed voice melted into the girl's ear, and then...

"Really?!"

"But of course. If you can listen to everything I say and do well in

your studies, no one will ever be able to take your brother away.” Agrippina’s words were a poison that soaked into the depths of Elisa’s soul. “After all, *you’ll* be the one protecting him.”

The soft-spoken message coated in immeasurable villainy caused Elisa’s tantrum to stop in its tracks. Her expression went blank. Of course it did: her brother was stronger than her. Erich was always the one to come and save the day. When she was scared, suffering, or sad, he would be there to calm her down—even if she was stolen away by kidnappers. He’d gone as far as to join her on her journey away from home.

But what if *she* were to protect *him*? The mere thought lit a fire somewhere deep in Elisa’s core. She knew not where this emotion stemmed from, but alas, a frog’s child is ever a tadpole. A carapace of flesh and bones did not let the changeling escape her alfish tendencies.

Imagining being able to lay claim to what she held dearest, did she have any hope of fighting this excitement?

“Come, take my hand. Rise to your feet and join me for a bout of study. Shall we? *For your brother’s sake?*”

Elisa’s eyes flickered back and forth between the outstretched hand and the smiling methuselah it was attached to. Eventually, the changeling made her decision: she grabbed hold and pulled herself to her feet with a premonition that what awaited her was a fun, wonderful fate.

All the while, the master grinned so wickedly that a hypothetical onlooker would most definitely have groaned in horror at how positively evil she appeared. She contentedly led her pupil to a chair, thinking only about how this would alleviate some of the sniffing and crying. Surely, this apprentice would suit her interests perfectly.

They would take their time—five years, ten years, however long it took—and she would shape Elisa into a magus capable of chasing off any alf.

Naturally, this could very well doom her servant to a bleak future, but they would cross that bridge when they got there. Besides, wasn’t this another one of Erich’s brotherly duties? Of course it was...probably. Nay, definitely! If she told him that this was a necessary expense to smooth out the learning process, he was sure to accept his lot. Agrippina’s dreadful logic would have sickened even the most savage of brutes, but it was enough to convince the magus that her decision was sound.

In the next room over, Erich was suddenly assaulted by chills and a fit of sneezing in the midst of reviewing his textbook. Puzzled, he wondered if he’d caught a cold.

[Tips] Imperial law does not consider changelings and

menschen to be the same, and the former are removed from the family registers of the latter.



Late Spring of the Twelfth Year (I)

Connection (II)

Different systems utilize connections in different ways, but some can play such a direct supporting role that they sway the PC party's tale. They can award money, lend items, and even directly assist the party using their own skills.

At times, they develop intimate relationships with PCs as lovers or mortal enemies, and they are helpful storytelling tools that add a splash of color to any adventure.

A week had passed since our journey had been put on hold by a divine feast. The uneventful time that had followed made the pandemonium of the first day seem like a distant dream.

While I didn't know why Elisa had stopped crying and begun interacting with Lady Agrippina more normally, I had no doubt the magus had done something clever to tickle my sister's desire to learn. Our entire family had tried telling her she'd get to be a teacher, that we'd be very proud of her, and more, to no avail. I didn't have the faintest clue how Lady Agrippina had managed to convince her, but all's well that ends well.

A terrible chill had run down my spine at one point, but I'd chosen to ignore it as the spring air was still rather cool.

I stretched my back while sitting in my usual spot: the coach box. For the past few days, I'd manned the front of the carriage and the two marvelous black steeds that pulled it along. The vehicle was a standard stagecoach, like those ridden by noblemen in comics and movies.

Usually, the handling of the craft was left up to a spell—magic was almost *too* convenient—so there was no need for me to be here. This was my way of removing myself from the room to let Elisa study in peace. When I was around, she had trouble focusing because she'd try to get my attention.

All that said, my first journey by carriage wasn't so bad. Rolling along while looking up at the open skies was enjoyable, and we passed by patrolling hussars every now and again whose gallant appearances were pleasing to the eye. They marched in minimalist garb, forming perfectly orderly lines, their long spears held at practiced, watchful ease. It was hard to put to words how dependable

these disciplined symbols of peace and safety seemed to me.

I even got to see bands of what I could only presume to be adventurers. I saw an armor-clad man and a young girl shouldering a staff packed in the back of a passenger cart. Beside them were a woman clutching a holy crest and a peculiarly short bowman restringing his weapon—judging from his height, perhaps he was a floresiensis. Seeing an archetypal beginner party had my heart dancing with enthusiasm.

Adventuring doesn't look as awful as everyone says, I thought. My expectations swelled. One day, I too hoped to gather my companions and set off like them. I would put forth my best effort to exterminate bandits, bask in the glamour of diving into forgotten ruins, and solve the kinds of trouble that would get my campaign recorded in history.

As I had thought, the royal road had its own unique charm. I once again resolved myself to do my best going forward.

In the past week, I'd received a great deal of instruction on the arcane in my spare time. Unlike miracles like Purify that could instantly cleanse anything from a dirty flask of water to a polluted river with the power of gods, magic did not have easy solutions. Housework handled with magic instead required me to assemble several spells into a complex formula.

What my magic text (aka the chore guidebook) failed to touch on, Lady Agrippina taught me herself. Specifically, she explained that magic could be broken down into three broad properties: mutation, migration, and manifestation. No matter how complicated the spell, these three elements could be used to describe it.

Mutation referred to the alteration of something that already existed. One could tweak the details of preexisting phenomena, like strengthening or weakening the flame of a bonfire. Otherwise, one could take a positive amount of kinetic energy and invert it into an equal deficit; in another example still, one could cause chemical reactions or physical severance. As the category that dictated changes in form, this could be said to be the most overtly magical property of the three.

Next was migration. As the name suggested, this pertained to the movement of a body. Shifting a mass physically through space naturally fell under this section, but it also included redirection of energies of all kinds. It even involved the transfer of properties from one thing to another, and one could overwrite an object's characteristics entirely in this way. Flashy spells that raised walls and let the caster move in inhuman ways most commonly fell under this category.

Lastly, there was manifestation. This too deviated little from what one might expect: this was the property that explained how one could

artificially bring something into being—from Is Not to Is. Manifestation was the most sophisticated branch of magic. Although spells were prone to twist the laws of physics, the general principle was to respect them while invoking an unbelievable effect. The world did not take kindly to Nots being, and to bend reality to one's will to this degree was practically the work of gods.

Thus, manifestation was effectively the practice of giving one's mana physical form and creating matter from it. By supplanting nothingness with mana that actually existed, mages told the world, "No, see? There *is* something here to make a new thing with." Alternatively, they fooled reality into thinking that they were simply using magic to bolster something that already existed.

However, the theoretical explanations for how exactly manifestation worked varied wildly between the different cadres and subfactions at the college. It would be easy to fill an entire book if one were to study the matter too seriously. In fact, two or three lifetimes apparently wouldn't even come close to enough time to understand it fully—and coming from a methuselah going on 150, that was saying something. I decided to keep it at an elementary level and store it in memory as "you can make stuff."

Broadly, I had five major chores: cooking, cleaning, laundry, organization, and needlework. Of those, the ones that I primarily used magic for were cleaning and laundry. Cooking with magic could bring about unpredictable results (say, for instance, that a spell to create a fully prepared meal reverted *after* it was already in your gut), so it could only be used for auxiliary tasks. As far as organization went, I'd been told not to bother past keeping things orderly. Lastly, it was difficult to leave any lasting physical effect on anything I stitched together with magic, so my mana was relegated to powering a sewing automaton.

It seemed that the world blended together the convenience of TRPGs with the inconvenience of physical existence. Of course, if a spell alone sufficed to make a meal, that would cause the balance of the whole setting to come crashing down. Plus, nobody would bother buying portable meal kits (now with a full week's rations!) ever again.

Besides, things would start feeling cheap if it were too easy to do everything. I'm sure some would disagree, but personally, I thought this razor-thin line between convenience and hardship gave the world flavor. The adjustments were so superb that I was certain I could share a wonderful drink with whoever designed the fundamental properties of this world.

My mind played host to both fancy and calculation as I picked up a handful of spells that I knew were *it*. Thankfully, my experience stockpile was deep in the black thanks to my run-in with the

kidnapper and my existing savings.

The first one I picked up was a non-combat spell found under the job category of Arcane Attendant: Clean. As the name implied, the spell removed all filth from a location and amassed it together in one location. Additional mastery let me target a wider surface area and new types of grime. Even at III: Apprentice, this handy spell allowed me to pick up all the dust, dirt, sand, and mud on a wall that was about six tatami mats large. I imagined every mother in the empire would love to learn this spell.

It was genuinely amazing. I wished I'd had it in my past life. I ended up splurging to boost it to V: Adept, and now I could break down any kind of uncleanness short of something being broken. Not only that, but it did so for the area of an entire studio apartment all at once. Dust and dirt was a given, but it even got rid of the stubborn grease and soot stains in the kitchen. The spell was the stuff of envy for anyone that appreciated hygiene.

The only issue was the quirk that required me to have the exact type of filth I was trying to clean in mind as I cast it; this meant I needed to investigate the origins of stains and the like before tackling them. The flaw stemmed from a fail-safe built into the magical equation to prevent someone from accidentally "cleaning up" the wallpaper—or worse, the wall itself—as opposed to the dirt on it. Considering that it was always more difficult to rebuild than destroy, this seemed like a necessary feature.

Still, I could have used it for quite the M-rated gorefest if I wanted to. Not that I would, okay? I'm sure anyone could come up with the kind of magic I had in mind: by peeling someone's skin right off their body, I could turn a living person into an anatomical model. It was an intoxicatingly potent "last word" sort of spell, but I was well aware it was *also* the sort of thing someone who belonged on the pointier end of an adventurer's sword would use.

I turned my attention away from this little trick. The Clean spell let me break down grime in laundry without even needing to soak the cloth in water using the process noted earlier. With this in hand, I would at least be able to fulfill the bare minimum of my duties as a servant. I figured I would learn more skills as they became necessary.

I looked up toward the heavens. The sun was already high in the sky, meaning we were due for a short rest.

"Madam, if I may?"

I spoke into a spell I'd woven and received an instant reply. As an aside, there was apparently some legal minutia that made it an issue for me to outright call her "master," I couldn't justify using her name considering our gap in social class, and we were far from friendly enough for nicknames. In the end, I'd chosen to keep it simple and

refer to her as “madam.”

Interestingly, she’d demanded that I absolutely not call her “my lady.” Perhaps there was some sort of trauma buried there. As an unwed woman who held immense authority, I’d thought the term to be a perfect fit, but her glare had been curiously intense when I’d suggested it.

The Voice Transfer spell I was using allowed me to send a whisper into a mystic symbol and deliver it straight to the person who’d created it; it was perfect for an Arcane Attendant. Its only shortcoming was its inability to initiate two-way communication, so private conversations would require both parties to have the same skill.

“What is it?”

On the other hand, the voice echoing in my mind was being beamed into my head using the Thought Transfer spell found in the magus category. This one *could* initiate a two-way conversation, and forwent the need to physically speak, cutting down on the risk that one’s lips might be read. Between the two options, this one was superior in every way.

That said, to acquire Thought Transfer at I: Fledgling required as much experience as it took to bring Voice Transfer to VII: Virtuoso, so I couldn’t help but feel the feature gap was an accurate reflection of its cost. As helpful as Thought Transfer seemed, I had other priorities; the knockoff version would have to do. It was troubling how absurdly expensive every spell that had to do with the psyche was.

Setting that aside, I notified my liege that the day was getting along, and she decided that it was time for lunch. I pulled the carriage over on the side of the highway and began preparing for break time. Not to say that I had to do much, though.

Lady Agrippina was not so fond of the outdoors that she would include camping as part of her trip, hence our frequent stops. In the same vein, the rustic recipes of campfire meals offended her tongue; her meal was something she’d purchased at the last inn. Kept both warm and free of rot with an incantation, I hesitated to reduce the luxurious feasts she enjoyed at noon to a mere lunch box, but that was basically what it was.

My only job was to return to the carriage after its interior had been changed to a dining hall to set the table. Once I did so, Elisa was made to study manners over their meal. She’d never gotten a chance to attend the magistrate’s school, so our master was going out of her way to teach her these things. In truth, Elisa’s lessons were still on the basics of the basics: she was learning letters and the palatial tongue, and today’s lunch seemed just as stuffy as always.

Magic was not so kind or safe that an uneducated pauper could learn it well, according to Lady Agrippina. Her argument was rather

convincing.

Me, you ask? I couldn't stand eating the same things they did, and settled my meals with cheap breads and dairy products. I used a knife to split a giant loaf in two and stuffed it with whatever I had on hand to make a sandwich, which was more than enough. Truthfully, I wished for a bit of mayonnaise or mustard, but I figured I'd test creating those with a cooking skill down the road.

I shrugged off Elisa's disdainful glare as she watched me prepare my unburdened commoner meal and returned to the coach box to enjoy my sandwich under the blue sky. The bread found at quality inns was made from only the best rye; unlike the loaves at cheaper motels that sat out after being baked in bulk, the texture was nice and fluffy. The subtle sour note paired well with the saltiness of sauerkraut or ham. *I bet this would go great with oiled sardines or anything else with a bit of fat to it.*

I finished up my simple yet delicious meal and decided to engage in a bit of exercise. The suspension of the carriage was exquisite—now that I looked, I saw that the axles weren't even connected to the main body; how on earth was this thing moving?—so I wasn't worried about my back aching or anything, but I needed to stretch my legs a bit.

We were quickly approaching the end of spring, and in any other year I would have been helping out with the pre-summer rush. The thawed ground needed to be tilled, seeds needed to be sown, and there was still a whole list of other chores to get done. My well-conditioned body was ringing the alarm bells, screaming, "Hey, why aren't we moving?! It's time for farmwork, isn't it?!" If I remained sedentary now, I would have a hard time sleeping later.

The madam was the type to thoroughly enjoy her meals, and I figured I had at least another two hours before we resumed our journey.

I removed the cloak that protected me from dust and sand. I let Schutzwolfe dangle from my hips at all times in order to get used to my shifted center of gravity, but here I pulled her from her sheath.

My well-loved sword was over half as long as I was tall—unsheathing her required a delicate touch. Although she measured shy of most longswords, Schutzwolfe felt like a proper two-hander to my childish frame. Had either my Strength or Hybrid Sword Arts lagged behind, I suspected I would have been unable to wield the blade in one hand.

I gripped the handle with my right hand and held the sheath with my left. Instead of pulling with my arm, I turned my entire body to free the steel from its confinement. While it wasn't quite easy, this technique let me pull out the blade without any unnatural movements.

I went through my training routine as usual, letting my body grow accustomed to the swings. A slash from above, the side, below, and a thrust were followed by a shift in posture and a rearrangement of the same attacks. I swung at the imaginary foe that stood before me.

My target was the joints: even the hardest of armors could not cover the whole of a body. Armpits, elbows, and inner thighs had to be kept open to preserve range of motion, and could only be protected by chain mail. With enough precision and skill, slicing through these weak points was a simple task.

The stronger an invisible opponent I could summon with my mind, the better. Like a certain martial artist, my ideal would be to envision a skilled foe who would come at me with pure intent to kill. Unable to accomplish this myself, I settled for fabricating a Sir Lambert + + to spar with.

Good, I'm all warmed up.

It was time to test out a few movements I'd had in mind. As was tradition, I'd spent over half of my accumulated experience points on one giant purchase: Parallel Processing.

This trait was indispensable for the style of magic-slinging swordsman I aimed to be. I wanted to take the kinds of spells usually reserved for major actions and cast them as my bonus actions.

There was no getting around the fact that magic required a good deal of thought. Who is the target? How will the spell function? When? How much energy should I use? These questions were just the things one needed to ask themselves to avoid a critical miss or fumble. With this many moving parts, it was a daunting task to get everything in order without serious concentration. The level of multitasking on display was well beyond that of texting while talking on the phone.

In which case, it didn't matter how quickly I could cast a spell, how easy it was to use, or even how mana-efficient it was. I would always be one beat of broken focus away from losing access to the mystic half of my kit—and with it went the experience I'd dedicated to it.

My answer was Parallel Processing: it allowed me to knead together several unrelated trains of thought in my mind. This wasn't the same as drifting into daydream while pretending to listen to someone speak; my brain now had the ability to activate a full-fledged second processing unit.

Magic wasn't the only task that required thought. Swordplay had a whole host of its own intricacies to it. Knowing that no amount of Intelligence would give me the computing power necessary to do both simultaneously, I had treated myself to something I was sure to need in the future.

I hadn't yet gotten used to the sensation of thinking two things at

the same time. There was a peculiar discomfort that accompanied it, and it brought about strange internal conflict. Regardless, I figured that both strands of thought were me at the core, so I would inevitably get used to it.

One half of my consciousness wove together a spell and activated it. Mana spewed forth from the lunar ring on my left middle finger to take the form of an Unseen Hand. With a third appendage that couldn't be seen, I would be able to—

That very instant, a terrible sensation took hold of me. My Adept Listening skill caught a familiar sound in the distance.

This...is the sound of an arrow being fired.

[Tips] One-handed swordplay of the West differs from the Eastern tradition. The reason a swordsman wields their blade only in their right hand is to allow them to carry a shield. Similarly, Hybrid Sword Arts follows the same principle: whether the left hand holds a shield or is merely a fist for an impromptu counterattack, leaving one's non-dominant hand free is encouraged.

I could no longer remember when in my past life I'd heard this, but I knew that the speed of an arrow was forty-five meters per second, give or take depending on the quality of the bow. That meant it would travel at least forty meters the instant after being fired.

However, its speed couldn't compare to that of electricity. The neurological signals that zipped between synapses in the brain yawned at the average projectile's heel-dragging pace. Further, drag and gravity chipped away at the arrow's initial velocity; with enough training, anyone could reasonably react in time.

With my impeccable Lightning Reflexes, I was moving by the time I'd heard the sound. I squatted down and turned to face the source of the noise, using my Parallel Processing to reroute my active Unseen Hand.

The arrow flew from the edge of a small forest a ways out from the road, but sank into my Unseen Hand before it could land its mark. This hand was mana given physical form—more than mere amorphous force—which meant that it could block things in midair. In essence, I could use it as a makeshift shield.

That aside, what the hell is going on?! Did I do something to deserve this?! More importantly, that was awesome! I'm so cool!

While praising myself for successfully stopping the arrow (in a mild state of panic), I looked out to the forest, where I could see shadows moving in the distance. There were several of them, and they'd realized their sneak attack had failed. A handful of figures rose

from the thicket and began to approach.

Bandits! Their clothes and skin were dirty, and their hair flowed freely. Their hodgepodge of weaponry solidified their image as the most textbook muggers I could imagine. There was no other possible explanation for what they could be.

They numbered... *Urp, that's a lot.* There were six of them: the one who'd fired the first shot stayed behind, but the other five were all sprinting toward me.

Argh, why are you guys posted out here of all places?! We're far from the main road and there's nothing around to rob! Wait, maybe they haven't been caught precisely because we're so out of the way? The imperial patrol needs to do its job!

A million thoughts raced through my mind, and I admit that I was in a state of disarray: otherwise, I would have hesitated instead of immediately deciding to throw down.

Later, when I'd calmed down, I would end up realizing something: nobody needed a servant like me to put my life on the line facing opponents like these. The madam was an unabashed powerhouse; I should have simply left them to her. Surely she could deal with these bandits with a snap of her fingers.

But she didn't, because I didn't think to ask. My mind was busy overheating from the nerves of my second real fight.

The first to charge at me was not a mensch, but a blue-skinned ogre. *Is that what male ogres look like?* He paled in comparison to Lauren, the bodyguard that I'd met long ago. Despite being remarkably muscular, his head only came up to where her chest had been, and his equipment was pitiful: his armor was in tatters, and his weapon was a rock fastened to a handle—a crude ax or mallet, maybe? His bloodshot eyes and drooling mouth hardly lived up to the ogreish reputation for dignity and discipline in war.

Above all else, he was artless—and mind you, this comes from a child with no real experience in battle. Everything from the way he ran to his overall appearance exuded a lack of training.

We crossed blades for but an instant. He'd abandoned the idea of striking and tried to tackle me with his sizable frame, but I stepped forward at an angle to dodge; as I did, I lifted *Schutzwolfe* with minimal force to slice through his underarm. My blade felt heavy, like when I cut through a particularly rigid target. Though the metallic skin and bones of ogres were tough, my swordplay and *Schutzwolfe's* blade won out.

I glanced behind me to see blue blood (which I guess made it copper based, like with horseshoe crabs?) spurt from his wound as he writhed around on the floor. I'd cut from below the arm up his torso, nearly severing his shoulder.

“GURUAAAAA!”

Does he not speak the common tongue? Although I found the ogre strange, I didn’t have time to get lost in thought. There were still five enemies left.

The next to approach were four goblins. They were one of the smallest of the demonfolk races, but while their stature was close to mine, they each had as much strength as a full-grown mensch. Short and light, they were famed as explorers of ruins and collectors of relics of all kinds. With reproductive properties second only to mensch, they were a common sight throughout the continent.

There had been goblin families in my hometown, and a few of their children had even been a part of our usual playgroup, so I recognized them right away. Yet something about them was off. Their weapons were shoddy—no metal, only carved wood—and I detected no semblance of strategy in their frenzied assault.

Are these really bandits?

I twitched the blade of my sword to follow my right flank, deflecting a thrust from one of their wooden spears—little better than pointy sticks. Knowing that he would have a chance to use the momentum to swing the butt of his spear at me if I pushed it away too hard, I gave it a soft tap. My aim was only to create an opening I could abuse, though with how out of their minds these goblins seemed to be, perhaps my skill was wasted on them.

Still, it would be no laughing matter if I got injured or died out of arrogance. Negligence had no place here; I vowed to treat every combat like I was the underdog.

“GYUAAAAA?!”

My parry was quickly followed by a restrained overhand swing that severed its left hand holding the sorry spear. The goblin crumpled, clutching its wrist with its remaining hand. It was in no state to continue; *two down, four to go*.

Up until this point, I’d engaged in two separate one-on-one fights. However, this time, two of the remaining goblins rushed at me from the flanks of the fallen spearman. One had a rusty dagger, and the other was equipped with a *rock*, but with an adult’s force behind them, those weapons were more than enough to kill me.

The last of the front guard was unarmed, but he’d evidently stumbled upon an ingenious idea. When one of his allies squatted down, he sprang off their back to leap for me. Though I doubted this maneuver was the result of teamwork, I ended up facing a three-pronged attack. *How unlucky can I get? Who the hell is rolling these dice?!*

Not even I could defend against this. Had it been two at a time, I could parry one and dodge the other with my current mastery of the

blade. However, the oncoming strike from above complicated matters. Usually, this scenario would call for me to hop back a few steps to give myself some breathing room; I would have too...if this encounter had occurred last week.

I slashed at the brawniest dagger wielder without skipping a beat. Taking him down was easy: he'd been running straight at me to stab me with his knife in a reverse grip, and my sword's reach was far longer than his. A stab to the shoulder was enough to neutralize him. The question was what came next—and I made my move without hesitation.

“GUA?!”

I channeled the spell that I'd been familiarizing myself with as of late and an impossible sensation filled my brain: it was tactile, coming straight from the force field summoned by my Unseen Hand.

Let it be known that this spell was more than a nifty tool to pick up spoons from behind the oven. A few custom tweaks were all it took to turn it into combat-ready magic. To begin with, a flimsy arm meant for picking up silverware wouldn't be able to stop an arrow, now would it?

The unarmed goblin flailed helplessly in midair, unable to find his footing. My Unseen Hand had him by the head, and I tossed him straight at his compatriot who'd been running at me with a rock.

The force of impact was significant. Despite the fact that goblins only weighed in at around thirty kilograms, the stacking forces of my throw and gravity turned the demonfolk into a fine blunt weapon. Rightly so, since the thought of three sacks of rice falling on one's head would cause most to say their final prayers.

Sounds of flesh pulverizing flesh echoed out as the two bodies tumbled away. It was so surreal that I might have laughed at them if a whizzing arrow hadn't replaced their presence. Of course, judging the trajectory of an arrow was easy so long as I saw it leave the bow. Sir Lambert regularly caught the things and threw them back.

Still, I took a much more elegant approach. Magic is a field that understands the concept of augmentation: the spells mages cast are mystic equations in every sense of the word—as coded programs to deceive the world and bend it to one's will, they can be rewritten to suit any number of interests. As with any user with a practical need and a silent, uncooperative dev team behind their software of choice, all I had to do was take matters into my own hands.

I'd truly been surprised when I'd first taken a look at my skills sheet after acquiring magic. Each spell had room for a slew of add-ons to alter its functions; at this rate, magic alone would fill a bookshelf with thick sourcebooks. Yet the mind-numbing mountain of information was an all-you-can-eat feast for someone like me. I had

added three modifiers to Unseen Hand.

First came Steadfast Arm. Under normal conditions, the effective force of the hand scaled with Strength and Strength alone, regardless of how much experience I showered the spell with. However, this modification allowed me to expend extra mana to bolster its power.

Secondly, I'd taken Giant's Palm. Again, the standard spell only allowed me to create appendages as large as my own, with similar reach, but this add-on allowed for extra mana to create more mass. If I pushed myself to my absolute limits, I could create a hand nearly as big as a twin-size mattress, and its range was based purely on line of sight, to borrow the terms of my favorite games.

Lastly, I'd taken Third Hand. The first two were rather reasonable (they were unassuming add-ons for an unassuming spell), but this last one was a little pricier. This allowed me to add the sense of touch to my Unseen Hands. To clarify, the hands did not originally give any tangible feedback; they were mere force fields that carried out their orders to specification. However, this meant finely controlling their power and speed was an insurmountable challenge. Perhaps I can express how difficult it was by likening it to an arcade claw machine where the claw is *invisible*.

With this trait, my see-through hands would have a tactile response, letting me control them more accurately. You may ask what I intended to do with this. While I'm sure some would immediately think of more lecherous uses...I thought it was best used as a powerful long-ranged attack.

"GUO?!"

My Hand flowed forth faster than sound and grabbed the ogre archer by the neck as he tried to nock another arrow. I'd mimicked the technique of the flashy swordsmen who crossed sabers in a galaxy far, far away. I'd been quite a fan of all the Darths as a child, you see...

Still, I refrained from following in their footsteps by choosing not to strangle the ogre to death. Instead, I kept a tight grip on his neck to limit the flow of blood for a few seconds until his struggling faded as my grip rendered him unconscious. Cutting off the carotid artery necessarily prevented new blood from flowing up, and any sentient creature that uses their brain to think is helpless against this technique.

Thus, the carnage of my first standard encounter came to a close in less than twenty seconds. I'd once thought that TRPG rounds ought to represent far more time than five or ten seconds, but now I had to eat my words. Each and every second was far richer than I'd ever imagined. Even with a handful each of adventurers and enemies, five seconds was an eternity in mortal combat.

My hands were quivering. The weight of the life I'd put at stake

finally began to set in. I had only managed to hold myself steady during the battle thanks to Sir Lambert's harsh, nearly life-or-death training.

I'm so glad... I'm so incredibly glad to be alive, and that I didn't have to kill anyone.

"What are you up to now?" said a curious voice from the heavens. I peered up to see Lady Agrippina sitting on a dimensional tear, much like she'd done on the night of the hideous moon. It was at this moment that I first realized I should have stood back and let her deal with our attackers.

Wait a second. Why didn't you help me if you noticed? Just as I prepared myself to give her a piece of my mind, she cut me off with a statement from left field.

"Why are you playing around with these daemons?"

What?

[Tips] Although demonfolk and daemons are made to be distinct, they are physiologically identical.

Agrippina du Stahl, first heiress to the Stahl Barony, was a gifted magus. Naturally, she knew well how she might meet her own demise and never let up her guard at any time. Although she acted listless and carefree, she always maintained the bare minimum of caution.

Her body was enveloped in protective magic at all times, and she never ceased casting detection spells as a preventative measure. These hidden defenses wrapped around her like a fortress; if one were to catch her off guard with a knife by some miracle, they would fail to even cut a hair from her bangs.

And, as ever, her mystic bastion was active while she scolded her pupil and gracefully enjoyed lunch.

"Elisa, soup should not be slurped."

"Ugh..."

"Neither are you allowed to bite at your utensils."

"Whaaa..."

"Sticking the whole spoon in your mouth is *unthinkable*."

"Buh...?"

Agrippina watched her student tilt her head in confusion as if to say there were no other ways to continue the meal. At the same moment, one of the magus's many strands of consciousness picked up on an abnormality. The detection spell she'd woven to surround the carriage had triggered a response from a handful of lifeforms nearby.

This, in and of itself, was nothing out of the ordinary. While they were far removed from the main road—in service of their stop at a nearby hotel—the route they were on still saw decent traffic,

especially at this time of year. Usually, she would have written it off as a caravan or passenger carriage, but that would hardly explain the figures she sensed coming *out of the woods*.

Agrippina refused to ignore a threat, even if it were but a trifling daemon. Yet that wasn't to say this encounter was trivial. There were four goblins and two ogres, all armed (albeit rather shabbily), and one was even prepared for combat at a distance. Each of the six assailants could easily win out against an average mensch. While the methuselah wouldn't even need to snap her fingers to handle them as it struck her fancy, the daemons would easily wipe the floor with a beginner party of adventurers.

Even ogres of the lesser sex were nigh-impervious to physical attacks, both blunt and sharp. A half-hearted mutation or manifestation spell would do little to overcome their toughness.

Meanwhile, a goblin only matched the strength of an average mensch, but far outwitted them. Furthermore, rapid movements of smaller masses were generally perceived to be faster by the naked eye.

In opposition, Agrippina's carriage was defended by a young boy who was on the receiving end of the element of surprise. He was a measly twelve years of age, still far from fully developed. He was equipped with a single sword and a handful of peaceable spells that he had only just begun to study. What was more, he hadn't even slipped on his chain mail before stepping outside; his travel clothes would offer a paltry defense.

Had there been a gambling ring present, the bookie would have called off the bet—the odds were simply too low for the boy to win. A bet for how long it would take the poor child to be reduced to mincemeat would take its place.

"Elisa," Agrippina said, "gently tilt your spoon to let the soup flow into your mouth."

"Hard..."

The magus remained as elegant as ever, in spite of the dire situation. It was lunchtime, and her meal was too well-made to wolf down in a rush.

The first arrow flew forth, sure to hit the boy someplace or another... Yet, curiously, it didn't.

"Hm?" Agrippina said. Here she had thought to whisper a wall into reality to shield him, but the arrow had stopped in place far before the need arose. With eyes trained to see magic, she spotted an Unseen Hand. The spell was ordinarily meant to be used to pick up things a short distance away, but remarkably, it had managed to catch the arrow mid-flight.

"Oh?" she mumbled in slight awe.

"What happened, Mas'er?"

The effects of magic were in the hand of the caster: even the exceedingly common Clean spell could be used to “clean” someone’s skin off in the middle of combat. The only weakness was that its simplicity meant it was easy to resist, but that issue could be circumvented with enough mana behind it. In fact, Agrippina herself had an acquaintance amongst the polemurses who employed such grotesque tactics in combat.

“Nothing at all,” she said to her apprentice.

Well, in any event, mere tissue paper could suffice to kill a person with enough ingenuity. The breadth and depth of magic guaranteed the same could be said of it. It only spoke to the fact that her servant’s bloodthirsty streak was wider than she’d expected.

Agrippina had long noticed that he spent his time gazing up at the open skies and mumbling to himself when alone, but she hadn’t thought that all that time had been spent preparing a spell like this. Perhaps he was in need of a reevaluation.

The boy’s mind was directed in all the ways a magus’s ought to be. He looked at ideas from multiple angles to seek out ways to apply spells outside of their intended use—a skill that was critical to any magus worth their salt.

Agrippina began to consider the possibility of employing him as a proper attendant once his servitude was done, and decided to quietly watch over him as he fought off their attackers. While her initial plan had been to wipe them away, the boy himself seemed to be raring to go.

The methuselah had read about this in a book: when a child is motivated to do something, it is best not to impede them. Not wanting to nip the little mensch’s curiosity and ambition in the bud, she chose to heed the advice of those who had come before her.

In the end, her servant did a splendid job in cutting down an enemy that would have surely decimated a beginner adventuring party. However, one question remained: why in the world had he kept them alive?

Had they been normal bandits, Agrippina would have understood—they were worth more that way. She would have gone out of her way to help knock them unconscious and drag them along, had that been the case.

Yet no good could ever come from letting a daemon live. This bewilderment discomfited the methuselah, and she put a hold on her meal after finishing her soup.

“Elisa,” she said suddenly, “be a dear and stay put.”

“Huhwha?”

In order to confirm her servant’s true intentions, the magus tore a hole through space and hopped in.

[Tips] Polemurges are the most tuned for battle out of all the mages at the college, and make their living via arcane murder. They are prized by all manner of authorities, as one can do the work of hundreds upon hundreds. Mere mages with offensive capabilities do not dare to don the title, lest they embarrass themselves; true polemurges can blow away legions with ease, and their mere presence is enough to pressure opposing armies into negotiation.

When I told Lady Agrippina that I'd never heard of daemons before, she was truly shocked. "First magia, and now this? Do all the peasantry truly live this way?"

To summarize her explanation, transformation into a daemon was the inevitable end for demonfolk who found themselves exposed to too much ichor—a substance as thoroughly incomprehensible as the False Moon. All that was known was that it was found in mana, and when highly concentrated, it drove those who came into contact with the stuff mad. It was the subject of great fear, deserving of its grandiose title.

However, we humanfolk and demihumans did not collect ichor naturally. We lacked the necessary organs to store it, so it simply left our bodies whenever we expended mana. Awkwardly enough, the whole process sounded to me like a kidney and its role in urination...

On the other hand, demonfolk were classified as such precisely because they had an organ to contain raw ichor, and they invariably were blessed with exemplary physiques and an intuitive understanding of mana as a result. This made sense to me, as I doubted standard evolutionary theory could explain metallic skin and bones or tiny creatures that matched the strength of full-grown men.

As the level of ichor grew in their bodies, so too did they grow larger, tougher, and stronger. If they sought after the substance in the name of power, they were sure to eventually reach a point of criticality: they would find themselves like the six half-dead bandits—or rather, daemons—writhing on the ground before me.

"Ichor tends to accumulate in one of three ways," Lady Agrippina explained. "Using magic that requires undue amounts of mana, residing beside a horrific source of arcane power, or continued contact with the lingering aftermath of a powerful spell. Well, a normal life ought to be devoid of such opportunity, and the greater part of all demonfolk die the way they were born."

In the countryside, this event was euphemistically referred to as being "touched with madness." If nothing else, this let demonfolk grieve for their fallen kin as *people* after they were put down.

Current knowledge suggested that the derangement caused by ichor was irreversible. What escaped them was not reason, but ethics, and they were reduced to savage beasts who attacked and ate non-daemons for the sole purpose of further incrementing their numbers. As a result, there were some nations beyond the Trialist Empire's borders that persecuted demonfolk of all kinds, refuting their rights as people.

The story was...bleak. *How utterly horrible.*

"Anyhow, put them to rest, will you? Nothing good can come of letting them be, so there isn't any need to burden them with meaningless suffering."

I finally looked down to meet the eyes of the daemons writhing around on the ground. They seemed pained, but the overwhelming bloodlust of their gazes had not waned in the slightest. They gritted their teeth and ignored their grave wounds to try and crawl their way over and kill me—sanity had assuredly left them behind.

Had I been a naive hero, I would have wavered. *Is it really all right to kill them?* I'd have asked. *Is there really no other way?*

However, I did not hesitate as I brought my blade down on the closest ogre's neck. My reasoning was simple: no one would benefit from my mercy here—not I, not Lady Agrippina, not the local townsfolk, and not even the pitiful daemons that I would have "saved."

Lady Agrippina made every attempt to shirk her responsibilities and was an incorrigible munchkin in her own right, but I could tell from our short time together that she took intellectual matters deathly seriously. Furthermore, the Imperial College taught the highest grade of wisdom the world had to offer.

I couldn't even claim to have *begun* my scholarly journey. What good could come of me asking for the impossible? If my earnest prayer was enough to save them, it would be a different story; it wasn't. I could do nothing to help restore these brutes to their senses. To leave them alive was undeniably the greater of two evils, as it would end with someone, somewhere, getting hurt.

Personally, I could think of nothing more despicable than to let another suffer because of my own inaction. Had I been powerless to stop an atrocity, or totally unaware of the consequences of my actions, I could forgive myself. However, to know of my own folly and to refuse action anyway was indefensible. This was not a matter of whether I would balk at the thought of killing another; I simply could not stand the guilt I would shoulder if I were to walk away.

Maybe one day there would be a treatment or cure for this ichor overdose...but such holier-than-thou platitudes would do nothing to assuage a family slaughtered by a monster that I let roam free. Thus, I

simply surrendered myself to my will—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I surrendered myself to what I thought my will ought to be.

The world was not made of absolutes. Someday, somebody could develop preventative measures or even a reversible cure for daemonic taint. However, today was not that day, and I was not that somebody. All I could do was limit the casualties as best I could.

“Splendid, splendid,” Agrippina said leisurely. “I thought a boy of your age might shirk the task, but you truly are a bright one.”

“I am delighted to receive such praise,” I said. This woman was bursting with talent when it came to stirring up my emotions. Truth be told, I couldn’t tell if she was doing it on purpose or not. If she was, then that was infuriating; if not, then that only made conversing with her more difficult.

“Now,” she said with a snap, “it’s time for the harvest.”

The refreshing sound of the click of her fingers was accompanied by the horrendous scene of exploding torsos.

“Waaaaah!!!” You may think me spineless, but I’d like for you to take a moment to imagine what I’d witnessed. Without warning, all of the men I’d cut down burst into a nauseating blast of gore. This happened to *six different bodies all at the same time*.

The half-crunching, half-squelching sound that followed was poison to ear and mind alike as their ribs opened wide to expose their hearts. Beside the now-still organ, an ominous black crystal could be seen in every chest cavity.

“U-Urp! Why?! What in the world did you just do?” Even after years of desensitizing myself to farmhouse slaughter, this was too grisly. *Seriously, give me a break!*

“Look, this here is what I’m after,” she said as the six crystals floated out of their original hosts. “Demonfolk amass ichor in an organ located right beside the heart.”

The precious rocks twirled about dreamily, but all I could think about was where they had just come from. Seeing them whimsically twinkle was disturbing, and I prayed that she would stop moving them soon.

“We call these mana stones. They’re quite the dandy little things.”

“How so?” I asked.

“They are used as building materials for tools powered by mana.”

When smelted into metals, these crystals increased their magical conductivity. When paired with proper gemstones, they enhanced their catalytic abilities. They could also be used as batteries to store away mana for later use. Their utility was reflected in their price, as mages traded them for sizable chunks of change.

I began to see a more pragmatic reason as to why foreign states

persecuted demonfolk. By marking them as prey, they would enter the national economy as yet another resource among many.

“At this size, hm...” Agrippina mused. “I wager these would sell for five librae apiece.”

“Five librae?!”

You’re telling me I have thirty librae on my hands? Thirty silver? What?! Seriously?

I had to take a step back. This was a juicy source of income. Of course, sane or not, daemons generally weren’t pushovers, and their savage bloodlust was terrifying...but five librae was a *lot*. *Why are these things worth more than living, breathing bandits?!*

“Oh, let me note that this would be the market price at which I would buy it for. As a seller, you should expect to earn ten to twenty percent of that.”

My wild excitement was readily put in its place. I should have known better. If they went for that much on the supplier’s end, there would be no shortage of adventurers. Rather, no one would bother to mock the ones that already existed for their poor choice in career.

Ten to twenty percent would yield somewhere between fifty assarii and a libra, not to mention the split with other party members. Ultimately, it totaled out to be about the same as, if not a tiny bit more profitable than working as a day laborer. *Ah, but what are the odds of finding a lone daemon? Hmm, but then again...*

I turned the mundane equations of impoverished finances in my mind and internalized the fact that this line of work really wasn’t worth it. When weighed on a scale against the value of my own life, the numbers simply failed to add up. Only those with a calling for the task or those taken by the romance of quixotic life could hope to live this way.

“Furthermore, these crystals drop in value should they be damaged in any way, yet some demonfolk races seem to use mana stones as an auxiliary seat of consciousness—meaning they can continue moving after having their heads removed. At times, destroying these bundles of dense ichor is the only way of subduing them.”

“Wow...”

I couldn’t help but feel that these restrictions were a bit much. You had to hunt powerful daemons to find superior stones, but to kill the host necessarily damaged the product—and any attempt to leave the stone unharmed would fail to restrain the daemon.

This is awful. Who balanced this? I’d like a word.

“Well,” Lady Agrippina said, cutting off my train of thought. She’d been peering at the goods like a merchant this entire time, and finally said, “If you sell them to me, I wouldn’t mind buying them at fifty

percent of market price.”

“Huh?!” *What did she say? Fifty? Five zero?!* “For a total of fifteen librae?!”

“Um, yes? Quite... You sure are quick with mathematics.”

Considering that the madam was halving her expenditures, it felt a tiny bit like I was being robbed; still, I was getting two-and-a-half times more value compared to a normal trade. In fact, if I screwed up with a less familiar merchant, I could potentially not even make the standard libra per stone. We were both profiting, so I couldn’t be more thankful!

I jumped on the offer without a moment’s delay—anything for the sake of Elisa’s tuition. If I could continue earning coin at this rate, there’d be no need for me to dedicate years and years of my life to servitude: it was possible to cover our overhead expenses and her tuition all at once. A sudden surge of motivation welled up within me, only to be interrupted by my master.

“Now then, off you go.”

“Huh?”

Her sudden send-off left me standing dumbly with my mouth agape.

[Tips] Mana stones are apparatus found in demonfolk that accumulate ichor. The most well-received explanation currently circulating the empire is that these allow demonfolk to maintain genetic qualities that would otherwise be physically infeasible, and that they act as a second brain that overwrites the way of the world by merely existing.

Although they are prized as a capital arcane ingredient, there are some regions in which they are considered too morally dubious to use.

Roughly an hour had passed since my employer ordered me to set off out of the blue. I found myself in the aforementioned forest, standing before a large mansion.

According to my liege, daemons were not the type to wander aimlessly about. They were subconsciously drawn to sites rich with ichor and formed cliques in such locations. This could be a cavern that had opened without anyone knowing, a decaying dungeon in the mountains, or even, say, a mansion that had long since been abandoned due to some kind of horrific incident.

“Ugh, it really exists.”

At present, I faced the manor fully geared for a fight. The two-story building was slowly rotting away in disrepair, and the creeping end that awaited its majestic exterior tinged the whole thing with

loneliness. Its surroundings didn't help: the canopy choked out the midday sun, drowning the whole estate in gloom.

The residence was far removed from the main road. Judging from the peaceful lake behind it, I could only assume this had been a resort home for a noble eager to retreat from the city's hustle and bustle.

I had only come at the suggestion of the good madam I served—that is to say, she sent me on my merry way, telling me that there was a good opportunity for someone so passionate about moneymaking as myself. If six whole daemons appeared, she'd said, then there was sure to be an ichor hotspot. And it's probably that way, she'd said. I'd trekked off in the direction she'd pointed; you can see the results.

Maybe I should put some points in Mana Detection... I'd been putting it off since it was so expensive, but I felt a pang of envy at the thought of instinctively sensing mana, and it would surely pay off in combat. Fortunately for me, the giant payday from my run-in with the kidnapper had yet to run dry, so the opportunity was there.

Alas, it was time for my fun little mental jaunt into the world of anywhere-but-here to come to a close. Lady Agrippina had not forced me to come here; I had done so of my own volition.

All of this was for Elisa's future. A normal servant would spend his life trying to repay her debts, so I needed to prepare myself for abnormal tasks. Besides, if this mansion was full of the mindless husks of what were once demonfolk, the humane thing to do would be to put them out of their misery. While I couldn't comprehend what went through a daemon's mind after the transition, their complete immersion in violence could hardly be a serene way of life.

I unsheathed my trusty sword and took a step forward, ready to enter the mansion proper, when my Presence Detection sounded the alarm: I was being watched. Tracing the gaze, I noticed that it originated from my own hip.

I had a small pouch dangling from the same belt as my sheath, and I was immediately struck with a terrible feeling. The small bag contained the rose I'd received from the girl who had introduced herself as a svartalf.

The black rose was a truly mysterious flower. It neither shriveled nor withered, which was to be expected, but I couldn't even pluck off a petal, let alone attempt to dissect it. Moreover, I'd left it on the table at one of the inns we'd visited, yet it had returned to my pouch before I knew it.

I wanted to rid myself of this cursed token, but unfortunately, the connection between us was not so easily broken. Naturally, I wasn't exactly comfortable being watched by a flower like this. Especially when I was about to enter a creepy old mansion that looked like the perfect place to be chased by zombies, punctuated by all manner of

indecipherable puzzles.

However, reasoning that nothing good would come of ignoring seeds that had already been sown, I begrudgingly pulled out the rose. It bloomed less fully than when I'd last seen it and had shrunk into a bud, though it retained its vivacity.

As I steeled myself for whatever came next, the juvenile flower suddenly blossomed. Its many petals stretched out across my palm as if they had just awoken from a nap. A tiny person sat in the center of the rose: it was the girl I'd met on that moonlit night.

"Yes, o Beloved One? What might you need?"

"Huh? Have you been there this whole time?"

The alf now measured about as tall as my thumb. She arched her back in a lengthy stretch and squinted at the faint amount of sunlight pouring through the trees.

"No?" she said, as if to state the obvious. "I've been waiting until you needed me."

"What does that even mean?" I asked.

"Mensch have trouble seeing in the dark, don't they?"

As soon as she finished speaking, she flew toward me on a pair of outsized wings. I hadn't seen these during our first meeting on account of them having been hidden behind her long hair. Her white wings glowed dimly; they resembled those of an Asian moon moth.

"So I thought I'd lend you a hand," she said, fluttering about in her idiosyncratic, imperceptible way. When she was right in front of me, she stopped to give my eyelids a peck.

Instantly, the dark woods that had been difficult to navigate with my Cat Eyes lit up like an open field. Everything that had been hidden in the shadows of the foliage was now clear—I could even see the dark interior of the mansion through the windows.

"What did you—"

"I am an alf who soars through starry skies. The dark that follows dusk is the most agreeable time of day, and all I did was share some of my perception with you." The little fairy hovering before me smiled gently and added, "I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

Does that mean what I think it means? Is this a "You better not die until I kill you myself" kind of moment?

"Besides," she said, "I need you to go and help my poor sistren."

"Your sisters?"

"Indeed. I'll spare you the details until the end. I have a reward for good little boys who can do what I ask," she said, laughing. Then she melted away in plain sight, and the rose from which she'd come reverted to its budding form.

Hrm... Basically, I'd been given a quest, I think? Taking a request from someone who had tried to kidnap me was a little terrifying; the

words “you fell into my trap” kept bouncing around in my mind.

Still, the madam had also bid me to venture inside, and tying up two quest lines at once was a tantalizing proposition.

“Oh, fine! Bring it on!”

At any rate, I wasn’t in a position to be dawdling; I readied myself once more and snuck into the manor.

[Tips] Alfar do more than play mischief—they also confer many blessings. The issue with receiving their “help” is that their assistance is given, not offered, and living with a double-edged blessing is quite the dreadful fate.

Time had robbed the mansion of its identity: when it had been built and by whom were details that had been lost for an eternity. Little did it matter, for those who walked its halls today could not have cared less. The shaggy carpet, beautiful sculptures, and arbor meant for tranquil afternoon tea were all meaningless to them.

A lone goblin sauntered down a hallway. Driven only by routine, he wandered his territory without any particular aim.

The ego and morality that had driven these creatures were lost, leaving them with only wit and skill meant to end the lives of others. Freed from the need for food and sleep, they were deprived of the most basic desires of a living thing. All that filled these husks was a pure, dark humor that abided in cruelty. They enacted great feats of violence and villainy that could only be explained as the machinations of an otherworldly being. One could not find in them the through line that guided every other sentient being.

Some magia theorized that daemons were the dregs of the world, brought forth by the False Moon. Seeing the beasts amble around without cause was more than enough to at least understand how they had come to the conclusion.

Much like the mansion it roamed, the goblin had forgotten everything about himself. He let his habits guide him to the kitchen as always. Once, this room had fed a nobleman and his retainers; yet now, the smell of mold and rot permeated the air. The goblin passed the half-eaten mess of a corpse of some poor animal that had strayed into the building.

The goblin looked around. After confirming that nothing was out of the ordinary, he turned for the door to return the way he came. He planned to absentmindedly stand just outside the room for a few seconds and then go to another room, as usual.

When he attempted to let the ceaseless, murky churn of his subconscious guide him, the goblin found that his legs would not move. Curious, he tilted his head down—yet a silver flash reflecting

the piddling light coming through the broken window entered his line of sight before his toes did.

Given another moment, he would have wondered what had happened. Alas, his limp body fell to its knees, forever liberating him from the basest of impulses that drove him.

[Tips] Turning into a daemon will not cause a demonfolk to deviate too far from their original abilities. In other words, their combat skills will scarcely be affected.

The combination of stealth and backstab is always potent; its only weakness is how infrequently it comes up. Trying to hide away mid-combat is so inefficient that it's often faster to put up your dukes and throw down.

I rolled the lifeless shell of the goblin I'd just stabbed to the corner of the room, and listened carefully for any sign that I might have been noticed.

Good. Luckily, things were progressing without a hitch. I'd snuck in through a back door and used an Unseen Hand to float a knife over to a goblin for a sneak attack. This spell was shaping up nicely, if I do say so myself. Tactile feedback made it useful as a scouting tool, and my tests of its backstabbing capabilities at range were going swimmingly.

Still, while I appreciated single-minded mastery, I feared that to dedicate all my arcane training to one spell would leave me helpless when it didn't work. Simple magic could be shrugged off by those with magic of their own, and this one in particular could be interfered with by physical means—with enough strength, someone could peel my Unseen Hands right off their neck. I needed to take this into account on my path to a power build.

Regardless, this was not the time: I was in the middle of a hack-and-slash adventure. For now, I would devote my efforts to completing my quest, as tried and true as it was.

The large cookery of the mansion was in shambles, without anything of note. Even an adventurer wouldn't stoop so low as to loot rusted knives or bottomless pots. While they could be sold off as scrap metal, the return wouldn't be worth the labor it'd take to drag them out.

I decided to put off collecting the creature's mana stone for later and headed for the empty doorframe leading back to the hallway. At times like these, a pocket mirror would have made my life significantly easier.

I gingerly poked my head out and made great use of the svartal's blessing to confirm that no one was present. This was the east wing of

the manor—mirrored on the western side of the central hall—and judging from the presence of a kitchen, this side was meant for servants. Classic tabletop tropes posited that the master's chambers or study would house a crucial item or boss fight...

However, today's goal was only to exterminate the threats that lurked here. These daemons had to be cleaned out to prevent any casualties from innocent passersby. Had that band of six assaulted anyone else, someone would very likely have died.

I crouched down and crept through the hall. The Perception Block, Silent Steps, and Stealth that I'd polished over years of foxes-and-geese were not to be taken lightly. You might consider me a sore loser for having been so heated in a children's game, but to that...I have nothing to say. At any rate, it was being put to good use now, and besides, there had still been a certain aberrant individual that had regularly beat me in our games.

Notably, my armor had little to no effect on my silent progress. The Konigstuhl smith had padded its joints with soft material to muffle the sound of movement. He'd said that he'd worked with adventurers in the past, so he must have had plenty of experience making orders fit for covert operations. The fact that he'd included this feature without my request only served to prove his awesome craftsmanship.

But now that I put everything together...I was basically an assassin. I tucked my class identity crisis away in my heart—not to mention that I totally ignored the fact that my very existence was a Frankensteined mess of different classes to begin with—and proceeded down the east wing, leaving five bodies in my wake.

Call me a coward, but sounding the alarm in a dungeon was a surefire way to trigger back-to-back combat encounters. No matter how much I trained, I didn't have the stamina to fend off dozens of enemies, nor did I have an area-of-effect ability to blow a horde away. I didn't care how monotonous my methods were; I wasn't taking any risks. Besides, I wasn't broadcasting my adventure; I had no incentive to mow down enemies with flaunt and flourish.

When the enemy was close, I used a Hand to cover their mouth and backstabbed them myself; if they were far, my invisible appendages strangled them to death. This simple flowchart had ended the lives of five goblins without incident.

Strangely, I'd come across nothing but goblins. Fantasy settings often propped them up as the quintessential beginner mob, but I supposed their large presence here was more due to their high fertility rates. Yet even then, I couldn't imagine that a whole family of goblins turning into daemons together was common, so it remained a mystery where they were all coming from.

Unfortunately, there weren't enough clues to sate my curiosity in any real way. I cast aside baseless speculation and instead gathered all of the corpses in one location as I continued to explore. This wasn't a postapocalyptic United States or an outer part of heaven: if any of these daemons came across their fallen comrades, they'd be sure to grow suspicious. Plus, I wanted to gather up all of the mana stones that I was to collect at the end in one go.

Speaking of which, I had found exactly zero loot. The only "armor" any of the daemons wore was tattered clothing, and the few rusted daggers and broken swords I found weren't worth taking. Furthermore, the final vestiges of the dilapidated manor's original image were rotting furniture and discarded rags. The inhabitants hadn't left in a rush; they'd likely taken their time to pack their valuables. I sincerely wished that the deranged enemies I came across would drop cash like they did in video games, but that was asking for a bit much.

I managed to finish my investigation of the east wing without coming across a single disturbing journal or dying message. Finished with that side, I skipped past the central hall and headed straight to the west wing. Personally, I was the type to enjoy dungeons from the outskirts in—saving the boss room for last. The central hall likely housed a reception area, drawing room, and dining room, which I thought was perfect to house a final encounter.

Suddenly, a memory flashed back in my mind. Once, I'd played with a full rogue party in a campaign run by a GM who'd been fond of hack-and-slash dungeons. Our indiscriminate slaughter during that session had been akin to a midnight assault. Let me say that those who initiate combat in the middle of the villain's speech are second-rate; a proper munchkin doesn't give them a chance to speak. The cover of night, screening smoke, and six backstabs had brought down the boss in one fell swoop without a peep. I looked back fondly on how the GM had begun to employ a suspiciously large amount of unsleeping golems after that episode.

The west wing appeared to have been the living quarters for the noble family that had built this grand villa. As derelict as it was, the substantial capital that had been funneled into outfitting the rooms still showed through. The passage of time had rendered the carpets into flaky earth, but a cursory glance sufficed to imply the soft, shaggy threads that had once graced the feet of those who walked here. In an era where rugs cost a minor fortune, this floor had no doubt been a symbol of great status.

Of course, the daemons seemed wholly ignorant of its value. I found one such daemon roaming the halls, and I'd never seen anyone like him. What looked to be a dog on two legs was the mindless shell

of a cynocephalus. I'd read that these demonfolk could be further classified as kobolds or gnolls depending on their facial structure, but the accompanying depiction in the book had been a bit abstract (putting it lightly) so I had no idea which one I was looking at.

Whichever this beast was, his towering 190 centimeters of height shook me. Facing a combination of human intelligence and feral physicality in my squishy mensch frame was not something I looked forward to. Martial combat was out of the question.

As I observed him, he suddenly turned his snout toward me—his damp, black nostrils twitching at the air. *Not good. Did he notice my scent?!*

I popped off a quick spell to shoot forth a rope I'd found during my exploration. It was in far better condition than most of the items in the mansion and wouldn't snap even if I used my Unseen Hands to pull it from both ends. The rope pounced on the cynocephalus like an enraged boa, wrapping around the daemon's neck.

The dog-man's upright frame was impressive—the girth of his muscular neck especially so. Expending all my mana for Steadfast Arm would still only leave me with a few times the strength of my childish body—as such, I'd picked up a tool to boost my strangling power.

My straw rope creaked as it made a vise around the daemon's windpipe. It sank into his flesh, leaving him with no room to wriggle a finger in to pull it away; his sharp claws only managed to slice into himself. After nearly a minute of struggle, the cynocephalus's eyes fell into the back of his head and all strength left his body.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Using the rope, I dragged his massive (and ridiculously heavy) carcass into an out-of-view corner. A quick frisk revealed that his neck had been protected by more than exquisite musculature: a mane of tough fur wrapped around it from all sides. Pelts were far more resilient than one might expect, as they turned blades, dulled the impact of blunt weapons, and warded off the razored fangs of their peers.

With a coat this impressive, I probably wouldn't have been able to choke him with my raw Hands. That had been a close call—if he'd howled for backup, I might have been finished. I renewed my resolution to observe my enemies carefully. The memory of party wipes caused by half-hearted preparation and stingy skillsets drifted to mind.

Owing in part to how small the rooms were, I managed to clear out the west wing without running into a cell with two enemies. I admit that this was just about as boring as dungeon crawling could get, but without hope for resurrection, my life was my most valuable asset. I still needed to earn Elisa's tuition and then depart on my journey with Margit. I didn't have time to waste being dead.

In a profound streak of misfortune, the west wing was also devoid of any hint of treasure—but I did find something of note. There was a study room lined with bookshelves beside the master bedroom, but the two were strangely small for their placement.

When I took another look from the hallway, I couldn't help but feel as if the doors were placed strangely far apart. My mental image of their widths left a full room's worth of space in between them...and when I went back inside to smack some of the towering bookshelves in the study, I could hear the hollow sound of empty space from one of them.

Yes! This is a classic among classics: a hidden room!

Excited, I pushed the shelf in question, causing it to awkwardly slide back. At my feet, I noticed a set of rails that allowed the path to be opened without much force. Years of neglect had caused the uncoiled track to grow stiff, but a moderate shove was still enough to push the massive wooden case forward.

Once I'd gotten the thing all the way to the end of the railing, I found myself in a secret den. The lack of windows had allowed a hideous smell to build up: dust and medicine mixed together into an indescribably sour miasma. Perhaps this had been a laboratory.

There was another shelf lined with volumes of waterlogged books and a small desk covered in tattered sheepskin papers. A larger work table was lined with a handful of equipment, like a crucible and water still, to name a couple. Among the delicate glassware and ruined wooden tools, some of the metal instruments seemed to remain in working condition.

What in the world is this? The room looked like an alchemist's chambers, but I couldn't even imagine what the noble living here had used it for. I tried to examine a vial of drugs from the medicine cabinet, but the weathered label had lost its legibility. Still, the unsettling chemical green in these vials was obviously abnormal. I could feel the tingle of residual magic, so these tonics must have been imbued with mana.

I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this. At this point, I had a sneaking suspicion that the daemons here hadn't gathered out of coincidence. They might have been *drawn* here; no sane aristocrat would need this array of dubious tools. I just couldn't catch a break.

If nothing else, the goods in this room would probably sell for cash, so I made a mental note to return for them. Moving all this fragile equipment was going to be a pain, though.

As I went around inspecting my haul, a cage dangling in the corner of my vision caught my eye. Embellished with an intricate pattern, the fine grating made me think it was meant for keeping tiny insects. Yet the palm-sized object inside wasn't a six-legged critter—it

was a tiny girl.

Clad in a green tube-top dress made of fresh grass with bug-like wings sprouting from her back, the girl was the spitting image of a fairy. In fact, the balled-up bundle of sleeping innocence looked the part far more than my svartalf quest-giver.

So this is what she meant by “poor sistren.”

My thought was accompanied by a squirming sensation by my hip. I looked down to see the similarly palm-sized svartalf trying to wriggle out of my pouch. She seemed to be struggling, so I opened the leather flap, and she flew out to land on my hand.

“Thank you, Beloved One,” she said with a faint smile. “How kind of you.”

“You’re very welcome,” I said. “By the way, is this girl the one you mentioned?”

“Indeed she is. This sylphid has been trapped in this forsaken manor as an object of study—and she is one of the pitiful sistren I bid you to save.”

Slowly, the svartalf unraveled the history of this estate and the alf trapped within. Apparently, this lakeside cottage had been owned by a noble couple of moderate influence until a few decades ago. The young mister and missus had held one another dear, and eventually the proof of their love had come to reside in the woman’s womb.

Misfortune struck when the new mother passed away shortly after giving birth. The father dedicated all the affection in his heart to his surviving daughter, fulfilling her every desire to the best of his ability. Yet one day, the girl began to float through the air and converse with unperceived partners.

The daughter was a changeling. Unable to bear the truth, the man lost grip of his sanity. To think that the girl his beloved wife had given her life to bear was not genuinely their own then spurred on further questions. Had his wife’s complications been the work of this *changeling*? This doubt sealed the coffin on his good sense.

Madness turned to rage as the man imprisoned his own daughter and began to search for a means to recover his lost child. He collected treatises, summoned magia, and explored every avenue of possibility in his research. Sparing no expense, he even purchased a cage capable of trapping the most formless of creatures.

Alas, changelings do not steal away children. The daughter he was searching for had never existed.

Eventually, the man could go no further. His fortune ran dry, his family grew tired of his antics, and the retainers he could no longer pay bid him farewell. Not even his closest relations could condone his actions, and his squandering of a vast fortune was eventually met with time-honored Rhinian judgment—with the alf still locked away.

Supposedly, the man's punishment had been carried out by his kinsmen, who'd once come to sort through his effects, though it was difficult to blame them for their inability to notice a hidden laboratory built behind a wall. The alf kept here had simply been brimming with bad luck.

All in all, the tale struck a chord with me, and I could feel a pit in my stomach. *Thank the Goddess Elisa didn't end up this way.*

"Now let her free, if you would please."

"Of course. Let me find the lock..." When I did, my impression was that the fastener was remarkably dingy. Despite the fact that it looked like a child's toy treasure box, it must have been enough to contain a powerless fairy with twigs for arms. I jammed my knife into the mechanism; one twist was all it took to undo the restraints that had trapped the alf for so long.

"Thank you. I expected no less," the svartalf said. She fluttered gracefully and slipped into the cage as soon as I opened its door. Shaking her slumbering companion, she said, "Hey, come now, wake up."

"Mmmaaah... Sleeeeeeepy."

"I know the still air saps your strength, but pull yourself together! Come on, wake up!"

"Mmm? Who?"

Watching the two fairies act out a morning routine comedy skit made the sentimental mood of a few seconds ago shrivel up and disappear. There *had* to be a more tactful way of waking someone up after decades of imprisonment.

"Augh... Morning."

"Don't 'Morning' me," the svartalf scolded. "Have you been asleep this *whole* time?"

"Mhm... I couldn't leave anyway. Plus, Lottie loves nap time!"

The new alf, with her sunny smile, was the very personification of a lazy spring breeze. Seeing her so merry made me feel like she would have been happy whether I'd come to save her or not. I felt like a moron for having tried so hard.

"Oh! Cutie!"

The sylphid wholeheartedly ignored the droning lectures of her svartalf friend and flew out the cage—the magnitude of being freed after years of captivity was evidently lost on her—and into my hair. Disbelief at her attitude had dulled my wits, leaving me wide open.

"Gold! Fluffy! Yummy!"

"Wait, that isn't fair! I haven't even had a chance to do that yet!"

I'd taken off my helmet after clearing out each wing to open up my field of vision, but that hadn't been an invitation for anyone to use my hair as a freshly laundered set of bedsheets. *Hey, ow, ouch?! Don't*

start a grappling match on top of my head!

The number of hairs that fell out during their scuffle sent my mood to rock bottom.

[Tips] As living phenomena, alfar and spirits have a nebulous perception of time. Only the most extraordinary of their kind can accurately assess the months and years that flow by. Resultantly, guests who visit the alfar realm can find themselves returning to their world centuries later than when they left.

The childhood cartoon heroes of my past life had often been punished by having a fist ground into each of their temples. I had never expected to see anyone reenact such a thing in real life—especially not two adorable doll-sized fairies.

“Waaah! Owie...”

“This is what you get for running off to play before you say your thanks!”

“But he’s cute...”

The svartalf was having none of the sylphid’s tears, and an intimidating glare put the latter in her place.

“Mm, ahem,” the svartalf said. “Allow me to thank you once more, Beloved One.”

“Yeah, sure...” In spite of her fixed posture and attempt at setting the mood, my brain was stuck in the scene from moments before.

“Now then, I believe it’s time for your reward. I can offer you two choices.”

The fairy stuck up two fingers. Then, she returned one to her fist, leaving only the index finger extended as her sonorous voice tickled my eardrum. Mysteriously, she seemed as dignified as the night we’d first met—it was such a shame that her appearance wasn’t enough to offset the farce I’d witnessed.

“The first is to let you keep my alfish blessing forever. Those mystic eyes can see in the dark and pick out the very essence of magic itself.”

“The essence of magic?”

From this tidbit, it was clear that she’d given me more than simple night vision. Like she’d said, she was sharing her perception with me, and my ability to see without light was just a natural by-product. I had thought that her gift was akin to Darkvision (a strict upgrade from my Cat Eyes), but that still required some semblance of light to function. Thinking this through more thoroughly, it was unbelievable how clearly I could see in this windowless hideaway.

However, the real question at hand was about the “essence of magic.”

“I’ve heard that even skilled mensch mages require a great deal of, shall we say, *tampering* to see magic,” the night fairy said with a snicker. “With the eyes of an alf, the structures, connections, formulae, and quirks are all ours to behold.”

That sounded quite impressive, but...I didn’t want to see more than I could handle. As a fan of TRPGs, I of course loved fantasy settings, but some of my favorite systems had touches of modern or cosmic horror with powerless PCs. In these systems, the players could ram Old Ones with fishing boats and encircle them with shotguns to take down slithery menaces from the deep, and one could build up their stats high enough to punt slumbering cephalopods back to the dimension next door.

Yet while someone *could* do these things, there was only one lesson that truly stuck with me: undue knowledge led to nothing but ruin.

Alf eyes let me see things I otherwise wouldn’t? Splendid. If that were to become the candle to light my path toward a better solution, I couldn’t ask for anything better. But here lay the double-edged sword: many of the things that were invisible to us were so because they were better left unseen. If I, in my insignificant mensch shell, cast my eyes upon some unfathomable being that twisted reality beyond my mind’s processing capacity, it would be all too easy for my soft, mushy ego to sizzle away.

Rats in the walls, voices from the land of dreams, unimaginable iridescence on the edge of one’s vision—there were too many tales of people witnessing that which cannot be seen or learning that which cannot be known. By and large, these stories ended in tragedy. When a human following their true calling into the depths of the oceans could be considered a *happy* ending, I saw little hope for salvation in sight beyond sight.

Something visible only to the magia that approached the root of all magic was likely too great a burden for me to bear.

“The second,” the svartalf said, “is a special pair of lips. With these, I will hear you call my name no matter where you are.”

“What does that—”

“Which means I’ll listen to your requests so long as they aren’t too indulgent.”

Am I supposed to become a fairy tamer or something? But judging from her phrasing, it seemed like she still held the reins, and would only lend a hand if it suited her mood. Much like the miracles found in the Faith category of my skill sheet, these favors would never be done to the detriment of the alf herself.

Although she didn’t seem wholly dependable, the risk factor was much better on this option. I mulled it over for a while, unable to

determine which of these two rare blessings would be better, but I eventually settled for the second reward. I didn't plan on taking up a full-time job speaking to blank walls, after all.

"I'd like those lips," I said.

"Really? Then these lips you shall have."

Her gait was as blurry to the mind as ever, and she pecked at my mouth before I could recognize her approach. While the image of a tiny fairy bestowing a hero with a kiss certainly seemed straight out of a children's fable, my full armor and drawn sword ruined the scene. The touch of her lips lasted but an instant. She licked my cracked lips as she drew away, laughing at my dumbfounded expression.

Why are all of my kisses like this?

Seeing her snicker, I mused that my wording could certainly have been misconstrued. In fact, I'd practically begged her for a kiss. Surely, my face was redder now than it had ever been before.

"I meant to say that I want the second reward," I corrected.

"Oh, I *know*—I just gave it to you. Call for me any time I have strength, and I shall come to your side. I rarely give out my name, I'll have you know." She leaned her whole body toward my ear and chiseled her name into my mind with a honeyed whisper: "*Ursula*."

With a hint of shyness, Ursula the svartalf sat on my shoulder.

"Let me offer my help right away," she said. "There is more fighting to—"

"No fair!"

"Hngh?!"

Alas, today's Henderson reading seemed to be rather high. Nothing went according to plan, and any attempt at a stylish segue was doomed to fail. Sometimes, the dice just don't want to cooperate. What do you do on a day like today, you might ask? You give up and join in on the mayhem.

The sylphid who'd been sitting on the sidelines suddenly slammed headfirst into Ursula's stomach. An unbecoming grunt was followed by a quick tumble to the floor, and the fairies continued their catfight on the dusty ground.

"No fair no fair no fair! Lottie wants to come toooooo!"

"Wait, ow, that hurts! Stop! I found him first!"

I couldn't tell if I was supposed to stop them or let them work their issues out on their own. I gazed up at the heavens to escape the reality that the two participants of this nonsensical brawl could probably raze this whole manor to dust.

What a nasty ceiling...

[Tips] Alfar that understand the concept of individuality are known to be among the most powerful of their kind. Their power

far outpaces whole swarms of standard fairies, and they are fated to eventually rise as kings or queens.

“Umm, I wanna thanks you, okay? So...Lottie has a present.”

The wind fairy's unrefined speech somewhat reminded me of Elisa as the little elf bowed her head in gratitude. I was impressed but unsurprised that her tumble on the filthy floor hadn't left a speck of dust on her.

“Sure, what will you give me?” I asked.

“Umm, the first one is Lottie's name.”

Huh. I have this odd feeling that I might already know that one.

“And the other one is...um? Mmm... Oh, I know!” After a lengthy pause, she began smacking herself all around her body. “Her Queenieness said boys love weapons. Um, oh! Here it is!”

Lottie(?) the sylphid wrapped her arm around her back and pulled out a terrifying weapon that was very clearly too big for her to hide.



What is that thing? A knife with a hole in it? The end of the handle had a ring of empty space that could just about fit a finger. The rest of the grip was fashioned to conform to a person's hand; the blade's shape was highly reminiscent of a can opener.

I had a feeling I'd seen this somewhere before. Maybe in a movie—no, in the supplements for a military-themed tabletop, perhaps? *Come on, I dumped so many points into Memory. Think, brain, think!*

Oh! I finally recalled its name: a karambit knife. I'd heard it was originally an Indonesian farming tool, but that its convenience as a hidden blade made it the weapon of choice for some combatants.

"Hey, hey, did you know?" the sylphid asked. "This knife is just like our wings. Only alfar and people we wanna show can see it. And, ummmm? It can only cut meat."

"It's a steak knife?" I accidentally said aloud.

"What she *means*," Ursula said in exasperation, "is that the knife can't be stopped by boorish metals."

What?! It ignores armor class?! This weapon is godlike!

Both its unique shape and short range would surely take some getting used to, but AC nullification alone made any trade-off worth it. The fact that it could block but not be blocked was downright heavenly.

"The knife, please!" I said enthusiastically.

"Whaaaaaa?!" She hurled—*How could she?!—*the knife away and used her tiny hands to grab my collar. "Why why why?! But you asked Ursula's name! Why won't you ask Lottie?!"

"Huh?" I said. "Uh, well... The knife seems really strong."

"Put some thought into what you offer, will you?" Ursula said.

Now, I admit that Ursula and I were certainly flawed: I'd succumbed to my greed for powerful equipment, and she'd all but admitted to giving me a crafty offer that she knew I would just barely refuse. Still, there was something equally wrong with Lottie's eagerness to give me something so strong. My left-hand slot was still open, and I could still grapple with a knife like this equipped, so I don't think I could be blamed too harshly for my avarice.

"Um! Ummm! Oh, I know!" In a moment of epiphany, the sylphid dexterously summoned a gust of wind to gather the dust in the room and hide away the knife. "Ah. Oh no. Oopsie. I lost it!"

After the fairy finished her monotone soliloquy, she glanced over at me in anticipation. I wondered how she would react if I asked for another weapon. Curiosity nearly overwhelmed me, but that felt a little too mean-spirited for someone of my age.

My scummy mental conflict lasted a bit longer than I'd like to admit, but at long last I asked the wind elf for her name. After all,

ages upon ages of accumulated folklore taught that those who bullied fey critters were sure to meet a horrible end.

The girl's smile shone brighter than the sun as she smugly puffed up her chest and said, "Lottie's name is Charlotte! Let's play lots!"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I said, feeling a bit drained. I poked out my index finger for a handshake, noting that Lottie was apparently just a nickname. "Hey...Lottie? There's something I want to ask you."

"Mm? What is it, Lovey One?"

Oh, are all of you going to call me that? I could just tell that if either of my new fae companions ever bothered to write my name out for whatever reason, they'd dot the "i" with a little heart.

Setting that aside, I pointed to the mountain of dust and asked if I could have what was underneath. After a brief moment of contemplation, she exclaimed, "Dunno! Lottie forgets!" and decided that she was feigning ignorance.

So...I guess this meant I could have it? I was a bit worried that some alf of great authority would come around very upset one day, and I certainly wasn't taking responsibility for this. But, well, if Lottie was fine with me having the knife, I had no mind to refuse.

I picked up the godly weapon and carefully dusted it off. Once I had it in my hands, I was convinced that it truly was made from the stuff of fairy wings: it was tinged faintly green and far lighter than I'd expected. I sifted through my memory to recall that it was meant to be held backhand with my index finger looped through the hole. With this grip, my main tactic would be to evade an attack and use the opening to either stab with a chopping motion or graze the foe as I passed by. I needed time to adjust, but my damage potential would skyrocket if I could make use of this.

"By the way, what can you two do?"

The incredible dagger was well and good, but my reward had been their cooperation. An alf each commanding wind and night sounded like a practical pair of companions, but I could only speculate on the specifics.

"Well," Ursula said, "with the sun up and the moon far from full, I won't be able to do anything impressive. Still, I can conceal your presence from those who might harm you, or rob them of their vision for a time."

"Umm," Lottie said, "it's cramped, so I can't do my best... But Lottie can find out how many are still breathing!"

Interesting. My fey backups' power apparently fluctuated with the waxing and waning of the False Moon. Still, presence concealment was a great advantage in close quarters, and advance knowledge of how many daemons I was up against was nothing to scoff at. I immediately asked Lottie for the latter, and she seemed overjoyed that

I was relying on her. She happily twirled about, sucking in a greater and greater quantity of air into a small tornado.

“Ugh?! Blagh!” I coughed.

“Quit it!” Ursula commanded. “Take a look around! It’s dangerous to do this in a room so dusty!”

Naturally, Lottie’s cyclone had stirred up decades of accumulated debris, hitting my lungs for critical damage. It was good to see her in high spirits, but I prayed that she’d tone it down. The alfar may have been able to handle this, but my mensch respiratory system was rather delicate.

“Ah! S-Sorry... But Lottie counted! Five! Five breathies!”

Lottie stopped fretfully for a moment while I coughed in the fetal position before giving her report. Apparently, she’d mapped out the whole mansion in those few seconds of windstorm.

“Umm, there’s three green smallies, and one doggie, and one blue biggie!”

Unless I was mistaken, the green smallies were goblins, the doggie was a cynocephalus, and the blue biggie was an ogre. I’d been getting used to the first two, but an ogre would make for a tough fight. Hard and fast, they weren’t exactly the type I wanted to face head-on.

Hold on a second. I have teammates to cover for me now. Maybe I should try squaring off against it?

My biggest weakness at this point was inexperience; for all my strength, I was still unripe. Considering that I had backup this time, I thought that this might be a good opportunity to accustom myself to dealings of life and death.

I’d lived a peaceful life once before. Born to a country unplagued by war, I had the great privilege of never once crossing fists with another person. However, I knew the road ahead was full of conflict—my coddled sensibilities were sure to spell disaster if I let them be. Thus, I could not veil myself in the sweet comfort of safety: I had to live through the thick of the fight.

The two alfar curiously watched me contemplate. I opened my mouth to ask them for help, giving form to my determination.

[Tips] Cute children with golden hair and blueish eyes may find themselves saddled with the Alfish Favor trait. They become fairy magnets irrespective of their will, and can earn great power from a positive exchange. However, an alf’s affection transcends mortal comprehension. It only takes one wrong step...

Late Spring of the Twelfth Year (II)

Wandering Monster Encounter

Minor, semi-random combat scenarios that crop up often in TRPGs with an emphasis on combat mechanics. These can heighten the stakes of the final battle by chipping away at resources, add a sense of urgency to the campaign, or else act as the catalyst for major plot points.

Spending too much time here can cause the session to run out of steam by the climax. These serve as a test of both the GM's preparation and the players' prowess.

I love convenience. Back in my old life, my appetite for novelty and the ease of online shopping meant it was all too easy for greed to overpower my higher faculties. Yet even so, I had to question whether I was spoiling myself now more than I ever had before.

“Alfar are *terrifying*...”

Faced with four daemon corpses in a holding room meant for maids and butlers attached to the wing of the central dining hall, I could do nothing but tremble at the sheer brutality of unique racial skills.

Moments ago, Lottie had led me just outside and told me there were four daemons within—prompting an “Ugh...” to slip out. Had this not been a fantasy world, I would have asked for a grenade.

Fighting four opponents solo is exhausting. It wasn't even a matter of whether I would win or lose; regardless of the outcome, the thought of expending precious stamina dispirited me. Truthfully, I was confident—I'd managed to face off against six daemons at once before setting foot in this building—but I felt as though I'd relied on my long-range backstab a bit too much. While I was far from physically fatigued, my mana reserves were shakier; I'd been throwing a lot into beefing up my spells.

I noticed that some of my usual energy escaped me. If this was how it felt to use roughly half of my mana, then I was all but guaranteed to black out upon using all of it. Apparently, I hadn't been born to a world where one could squeeze the value out of every last point of HP and MP with zero repercussions. The designers clearly hadn't taken the age-old advice that there's a point where simulationism only turns players away...

Jokes aside, I decided to get things over with and asked Ursula to temporarily blind the daemons, at which point I walked in and promptly dispatched them with my new fey knife. It was easy to the point of feeling fake.

This combo was so strong that I feared the thought of getting used to it. Like players who chose overpowered characters in fighting games, I could see myself degrading to the point where this would be *all* I could do. Convenience was lovely, but I had to remind myself not to indulge too much. Eventually, the time would come when I would need to fight my way out with my own two hands.

“That’s right, Beloved One. Alfar are to be feared. I’m glad to receive your love, but do make sure not to rely on us too heavily. Although I will say this: dancing on a twilight hill without a care in the world is *quite* ravishing.”

Ursula looked positively delighted as she spoke. I couldn’t understand why all the innocent faces around me loved whispering traumatic things into my ear. For the first time in a while, I took in the shivers that shot up from my tailbone as I put away the knife. Despite my eager use of the weapon, the blade was immaculate. This too was something I couldn’t let myself lean on—using a blade so perfect, I might lose the fundamental instinct to angle my sword properly.

With the group of four out of the way, all that remained was one ogre, whom Lottie had already confirmed to be waiting in the dining room. *Was this placement intentional?* Had I charged in without thought, I would have been blocked in by the four daemons waiting in the wings. This was exactly the sort of trap that GMs employed to kill boneheaded PCs. Despite shuddering at how pervasive their bloodlust seemed, I psyched myself up as I pushed open the door to the dining hall.

Let’s do this fair and square.

Here, lavish recipes had lined the table; a family had exchanged heartfelt smiles; guests had praised the cooks for their fine cuisine. Yet all that remained was a depressing sight. With no one to use it, the long table had been smashed and thrown to one side. The red carpet had decayed into black, and the desaturated decorations had cast their lot with the artistic school of atrophy.

At the far end of this decrepit space, a single chair the lord of the manor had once used remained upright; in it was the imposing, gallant figure of a perfectly polished ogre.

The afternoon sun trickling in from a broken window dimly glimmered on blue skin peeking out beneath hide armor. The pelt was mostly intact, with its rugged edges only heightening its valorous air.

I took in the *female* ogre in all her glory, a large buckler in her left

hand and a massive sword in her right.

“Wait, wait, seriously?”

Her menacing gaze met mine: the glowing gems that poked out from the gaps in her lustrous indigo bangs had an undeniable wit hidden within. The art of battle she’d honed in her life now encased her like armor and shone through her eyes. She was not the same as the male ogres who’d been fully reduced to their primal instincts I’d cut down at noon.

She rose slowly, as if the task of standing bored her. Her beautiful face was slack with indolence as she took her sword and shield. The massive blade, built for her kind, had the reach of a spear by mensch standards.

After turning her neck a few times to get her bearings...she leapt toward me. Combat had begun. No words were exchanged: we were merely pitting one life against another to see whose was tougher—an experiment that would continue until one was irreparably destroyed.

The ogre approached in a straight line, her shield raised and her weight behind it. Her technique with the sword and shield was so impeccable that I wanted to place a diagram of her form in a textbook. Her shield was perfectly positioned to deny access to her vitals, angled slightly to roll off any impact. On the other hand, the brunt of her blade was hidden behind her, making it a challenge to guess where she would strike.

An ill-timed step forward would be met with a heavy shield bash, and any half-baked attempt to dodge would leave me a sitting duck for her readied sword. On the offense, a lukewarm attack would bounce off her shield and give her enough time to make a full-course meal out of me. She pushed the fundamentals to their absolute limit; her strategy was too simple to poke holes in easily, yet so refined that I could hardly believe she was mad.

Furthermore, she was three meters tall and probably weighed more than an armored truck. Her presence was so staggering that any normal person would turn tail and flee or search for the most painless means of dying as they cursed their fleeting life. Faced with this flesh-and-bone tank that would reduce me to mincemeat if I let her, I wielded Schutzwolfe low and dashed forward.

I won’t lie: the entire premise of the fight intimidated me. Still, my spirit was unbroken—after all, Sir Lambert had prepared me for fights just like these.

What is most crucial in combat? Power—there can be no dissent. Speed—none would deny you. Wit—of course, a vital element. Yet none of these are the answer: the true warrior is ever watchful. He knows the space between himself and his opponent, reevaluating the distance with each passing moment, occupying the perfect spot at all

times!

As soon as I entered her range, the sword hidden behind her massive frame contorted into a dark gray whirlwind. Her blade scooped up from below, and I could tell the grandeur of her swing was a front for the delicate touch hidden in her bladework. Well aware that strikes from below are difficult to dodge, she'd recognized that my light equipment and lack of a shield made her choice of attack ideal.

The force of her swing caused the tip of her sword to blur; if she hit me, my legs and torso would share a tear-jerking farewell, armor be damned. Impending doom aroused my Lightning Reflexes, and as the world slowed, I used my Insight to plot out the trajectory of her peerless strike.

Oh, how beautiful your skill is. The arc of her blade couldn't have been more perfect if I'd drawn it with a compass. Every limb had to coordinate perfectly with the rest of her body to accomplish a feat like this. It was leaps and bounds ahead of attacks made by fools who swung with their arms instead of their hips...but while parrying thoughtless swinging was easy, it was also unpredictable.

Her textbook form was so seamless that I knew exactly what she was going to do. As the milliseconds dragged on, I hopped ever so slightly. Kicking off with my right foot toward the belly of her blade, I landed with my left. The minor change in position over a fraction of a second had been the difference between being bisected and slipping into safety as she rushed toward me.



I heard a gust of wind follow the ogre's sword behind me. She'd trimmed off a few strands of hair—she would have peeled the skin off my back had I been any slower. A cold sweat ran down my neck.

Regardless, I'd rolled a success on my reaction, as difficult as it was. At times like these, stepping back out of fear was the worst thing to do. Making distance wouldn't help me counterattack; for the opponent, all it did was leave me one step away from striking distance again.

To fight—that is, to attack and not merely buy time to flee—involved advancing even during evasion. Still, I was far from home free: I was up against an enemy that wielded a buckler the size of a mensch's tower shield, after all. Although the word "shield" has a defensive nuance, it was ultimately a giant slab of wood and steel. It followed that it had a great deal of rock-solid mass—all the makings of a great blunt weapon.

The ogre displayed neither surprise nor panic upon seeing me dodge her slice. Her golden irises followed me calmly and she jerked her body, her sword still high in its arc. To swing up with one's right arm necessarily causes the left to dip, and to draw back is to build up power.

She unleashed her spring-loaded arm, slamming the shield into the ground with ludicrous force in an attempt to crush the entirety of the space in front of her. It was a marvelous attack: the bands of steel reinforcing her shield's edge crashed to the ground, kicking up carpet and wood chips with a deafening roar. Direct contact would have reduced me to jelly even if I was wearing the fanciest armor ever made.

Impressive as it was, I took no time to gawk; I tumbled left, sticking to the ogre's right-hand side. Scattering splinters pelted me, but my armor kept them from causing any more damage than a minor sting.

Stepping into her range was terrifying beyond belief. Her sword was a tempest of steel, her shield a castle wall, and the gargantuan fists she had yet to resort to were pillars in and of themselves. Yet I'd gotten *too* close for her—swallowing my fear, I'd managed to enter a blind spot, breaching the towering walls of her fort.

"Aaargh!" I made no effort to dampen my momentum as I whizzed by, nearly close enough to touch her thigh. With an uncharacteristic war cry, I slashed Schutzwolfe upward, aiming for the exposed wrist where her armor opened from link bracer to glove.

Every atom in my body moved in sync to coordinate strike and step, transferring the whole of my forward momentum into my arms. Finding its mark, my blade sank in and tore out, severing flesh and

bone alike.

Dull paralysis spread through my hand. The feedback felt like it couldn't have come from a living being. That a full body swing with all of the force I could muster was still so sluggish was disheartening. Had my angle of entry been a degree or two off, I would have certainly been shaken off and sprained my wrist.

Yet it appeared that I'd claimed my reward for the tingling in my hand. The tip of my blade dripped with oozing blue blood.

"GUIII..."

I whipped around while drawing back to see the ogre drop her sword with a loud thud. I'd pierced her arm and gotten halfway to lopping off her wrist.

Lightning Reflexes gave me an immaculate perception of movement, Insight offered an intuitive understanding of the best locations to target, and Parallel Processing allowed me to come up with a strategy that took every possibility into consideration. Finally, my VI: Expert level Hybrid Sword Arts and Enchanting Artistry combined to render Schutzwolfe a fang capable of splitting alloyed bones.

The legendary wolf had clawed through the tendon in the ogre's right wrist. Unable to form a proper grip, she fumbled, grasping uselessly at her fallen sword.

A *mistake*, I noted; I sprinted as fast as I could manage without tripping, not giving her any time to regain her bearings. With my sword pointing from my shoulder, I lunged for her defenseless rear at full speed.

"GURUOOOOOOO!"

Unfortunately, I'd underestimated her reaction speed. She turned quickly enough to cover for her slipup, ready to backhand me from above with her shield angled parallel to the ground. Considering her strength, she would have been able to blow away a light car with this motion. Eating her counterattack would make my head explode like a pomegranate.

So, I tasked my Hands with a new job. I dropped down to dodge her portable falling ceiling, only to be met with a lethal kick at point-blank range. Although the wind generated by her initial movement was painful in and of itself, I forced myself to dodge with a little nick-of-time spellcraft. By rapidly creating a Hand to support me, I secured my balance and sorted out my footing with an extra step. Cheating to her right, I slipped past her while offering her leg a parting gift—I yanked a leather pad to one side with an Unseen Hand and sliced at her exposed flesh.

This was the blend of magic and swordplay I'd envisioned. My style did not rely on one or the other, but both at once, shrinking the

distance between my blade and an opponent's life. Every facet of this combat paradigm served to enhance the return for raw skill.

A smattering of blood spurted forth, soaking into a blue stain on my chest. The sensation of foreign muscle straining and then yielding raced through my arm.

“GOAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

And in the very next moment, a booming blast sent me sailing through the air. The ogre had managed to stabilize herself with torso movement alone, kicking her freshly severed leg into me. Although she hadn't had the leeway to build up for a proper attack, the bone running through her shin was sturdy, and the sinews wrapping around it were as thick as suspension bridge wiring. The impact of having a leg like that hurled at me could not be understated.

What tenacity—what thirst for blood! I'd paid the price for my naive thought that cutting her tendons would neutralize her. I could hardly breathe; my stomach tried to crawl out of my mouth. The terrible pain in my chest echoed through the rest of my body when I bounced off the floor.

I'd been saved by the Unseen Hands I'd barely managed to conjure, cushioning the blow from the flying leg... Had I been even a fraction of a second later, I would surely have died.

As I tumbled back, I desperately grasped at the carpet to slow my velocity. The pain of impact reverberating from my chest made me want to cry, and every fiber of my being hurt from rebounding off the floor, but I hadn't broken any bones. More importantly, I was *alive*. An attack of that caliber ordinarily should have snapped my ribs like twigs and crushed my heart in one fell swoop. Evidently, my loose wallet was finally paying dividends.

I spit out the blood flowing from a nasty gash inside my mouth. The ogre had lost control of her posture shortly after parting with her leg, and her attempts to put weight on her right side caused her to lose balance and kneel.

“GUOOO...”

I would not call the sight of her trying to rise while holding her leg pathetic—but it was profoundly sad. Although I had been the one to do it, seeing this proud, mighty warrior brought to her knees pricked at my heart.

Yet still, her will to fight was alive and well. The instant she recognized her leg's uselessness, she began biting at the clasps on her shield—by the time I'd registered what she was up to, it was already flying toward me.

“Whoa?!” I screamed, barely ducking out of the way. The gruesome flying disk whizzed through the space my head had occupied moments prior. It smashed the door to flinders and flew off

into the hallway as if it were flying off to freedom...and I didn't hear it fall. Forget crushing me—that would have cleaved me in two.

Her bloodlust was a thing of wonder. Even after losing half of her limbs, murder was the only thing on her mind. Unlike the original six daemons that had groveled in pain, her will to fight until her last breath offered a glimpse into the chivalry and strength that personified her when she'd been sane.

It would have been an honor to meet you before you turned.

Looking again, her newly freed left hand reached for her sword. She still hadn't given up, and she wouldn't so long as her heart continued to beat.

Gritting my teeth, I called on my drying well of mana to shove away her giant sword and pick up my own from where it'd flown upon impact. I took hold of Schutzwolfe's grip as if she were a loyal hound returning to her master. Beating down the horrid pain that screamed from every pore, I walked forward.

The fist that awaited me no longer had any force behind it. Even without Lightning Reflexes, an attack of this speed was simple to dodge. Something about her sluggish punch filled my heart with desolation as I sidestepped it to bring down my sword.

Schutzwolfe's edge glided into her neck, cutting about a fourth of the way through. A mist emerged as her arteries pumped out blue globs, and I remained alert, stepping back to avoid the spray. It wasn't simply a matter of not wanting to shower in her blood: each of her death throes left a tempest that blew past my face in its wake. She screamed as if to refute the thought of defeat, violently throwing her nearly severed right hand at me as I retreated. A second or two of delay would have left me looking like a splattered frog.

After all this, the fiery desire to end me still gleamed in her eyes. It sank into the back of my brain, hardening into fear. Never before had I been assaulted with such vivacity—such intense *life*.

There was no good nor evil to her bloodlust as it lapped at my soul and constricted my body. What would have happened if I'd been watching the crimson glint in these eyes as we'd fought? Insight allowed me to view her form as a whole—but without it? That was a situation I didn't want to imagine.

Still trying to stymie the endless stream of blood, the ogre attempted to stand only to fall flat. Yet her gaze remained fixed on me, filled with nothing but an unquenchable desire for my life. Her eyes were screaming that, if not physically, she would try to murder me with force of will alone.

Pulsing blood slowly drained her of life, eventually snuffing it out altogether. All I could manage was to watch over her, struck with dumb awe... *So this is what it means to fight to the death.*

It had been horrific. I was shaken to my core, and I could feel my spirit whimper away. Strength abandoned me to the point that the thought of standing was enough to distress me. The ogre's blazing hatred had sparked a war of the mind, and withstanding a siege of dozens of mental attacks had been frighteningly exhausting.

At the time, I did not feel the thrill of victory or the joy of accomplishment; all I felt was the unfiltered relief that I had survived.

I now knew that less than a few minutes prior, I hadn't at all understood what it meant to cross swords. Dispatching enemies far weaker than myself was no fight—it was slaughter. For the first time, I had found myself in *battle*, where one misstep from either side led straight to death.

Haunted by numbness, I forced air into my lungs and pushed myself to my feet. What would I gain by faltering now? There was no point in pondering the life I'd taken, or swearing to live on for both of our sakes. On the receiving end, the most she'd thought would have been, "You got me, you bastard." No one cared whether their killer would go on to gallantly fight in their stead; it was easy enough to come to that conclusion by imagining myself in the shoes of the loser.

I thought back on the reason I picked up the blade: I didn't want my loved ones to experience this sheer terror. I was here now as Elisa's brother to win back her future. I didn't have time to dawdle here.

"May this great warrior's soul see no rest by the War God's side," I said, reciting a hymn from our pantheon's God of War.

As I wiped the blood off of my sword, my body finally reached its limit. My legs gave out, and I buckled down onto my ass. The heavy thumping in my stinging chest felt like it was going to make me split open.

Oh, god, I didn't think I'd be reduced to a tattered rag twice in one season.

"That must have been exhausting," Ursula said, blurring out of the darkness. I looked her way as I showered myself with my waterskin.

"Wowie, you did super!" Lottie reappeared with a gust of wind, consoling me by rubbing my cheek.

"Yeah, I really am tired. But now, I'm finally done."

The gentle spring breeze soothed my heated skin; if this was the world's reward for my efforts, it was almost enough to bring me to tears. Now, all that remained was to collect the mana stones and return to the carriage to collect my payment.

"Oh, but you're not, are you?"

"Huh?"

My indescribable sense of accomplishment was suddenly derailed. I opened my eyes wide in shock only for Ursula to bid me to stand.

Huh? That daemon has to be dead, right? Is there a hidden boss or something? If so, I've got a word or two for this GM's encounter design.

"It isn't a fight," Ursula said, reading my mind. With her hands on her hips, she huffed and continued, "There is one more of our kind you have yet to help."

"Another one?"

"Yes, didn't I say so? When we found Lottie, I do believe I said she was *one* of the sistren I bid you to save."

Now that you mention it... "But I already received the reward," I said.

"That was that; this is this. This is a separate matter from your reward. Besides, I have my...apprehensions about this."

"What do you mean?" I asked. Ursula avoided eye contact.

"Now, come along," the svartalf said. "She too is sealed away in a manner that we alfar cannot undo."

"Okay, okay! Stop tugging on my hair, I'll go bald."

"No need to worry about that. You won't ever bald—you won't even grow gray hairs."

"Yeah, those aren't cute!" Lottie added.

What did you just say? I felt like their final statements weren't something to gloss over, but a powerful tailwind pushed me to my feet and the two tiny fairies dragged me by the hand to the back of the dining hall.

We traversed a handful of hallways to come to a skewed door. They bid me to open it, and I did so to reveal a staircase leading into the basement. Strangely, the descending corridor seemed to continue forever, as I couldn't see the end in spite of Ursula's blessing.

This dungeon has more than one hidden room? How hard-core is this place?

The air rising up from below filled the cramped stairwell like the throat of a groaning behemoth. My fatigued body almost locked up in protest. I couldn't handle another fight without rest.

"Don't worry!" Lottie said, taking note of my hesitance. "The scaries are all gone!"

"All right," I said. "Then let's keep going." *Fine. You want me to go? I get it, I'll go.*

I took a few deep breaths and slowly began my descent. The vestiges of magic tools lined the walls flanking me on both sides; perhaps this path had once lit up when someone was present. There were spells scrawled all over that I was too green to understand. While I would have liked to stop and jot them all down, this clearly wasn't the time.

"It took an eternity for the mana feeding these spells to bottom out," Ursula said.

Twenty-eight steps down, a short landing gave way to more stairs. The landing was also marked with a peculiar symbol, but when I dusted it off, the ink making up its structure had indeed blurred with time.

“Hey, this place looks like it’s meant to keep something really dangerous locked up,” I said, voicing my growing concern. And, wouldn’t you know it, the second flight of stairs *also* had twenty-eight steps—a mathematically perfect number that some religions abroad considered holy. Walls lined with rituals in a staircase that intrinsically had mystic properties pointed to *something* being down here...and, well, I had a hunch as to what it was.

“Continue on. There is nothing to fear.”

“It’s okay, she’s super nice!”

The alfar beckoned my frozen legs to move, and when I turned the final corner, I was met with a massive double door. However, this door was clearly different from the stairwell leading to it.

“The magic here is still active?” I said, puzzled.

The arcane circlet built into the door was still alive and well. Unlike the scrawlings above, the spell had been worked into the metal bands that supported the door itself. A large gemstone in the center of the two halves had been set as a battery, and its faint glow had persisted to this very moment.

“I don’t get the details, but...” One touch was enough for my novice mind to recognize the intent behind it: this was a lock meant to ensure that whatever lay within never saw the light of day again. To begin with, doors are inherently rife with the semiotics of quarantine—bolstered with a powerful spell, its properties of enclosure spread to the whole room it led to.

“Ursula, how do I open this?”

“I’m sure you can already tell.”

Much like what awaited me within, I had a solid guess as to what I needed to do. I asked anyway, but the fairy wasn’t very receptive to my games.

“I have to break that, don’t I?”

“You do indeed.”

“Yuuup!”

I knew it. Clinging to a thread of hope that it might just open anyway, I tried the doorknob to no avail. I sighed; the gem was probably a lapis lazuli, and it was large and antique to boot. Something like that could turn into gold coins (plural!) if I managed to bring it back in one piece, but it was not meant to be.

Argh, dammit, I guess I should be cursing myself for not having a rogue in my party to pick the lock. Why am I dungeon crawling as a solo warrior?!

In a minor fit of despair, I hacked at it with Schutzwolfe, which sliced through the jewel like butter. My dim hope of recovering a decent chunk lasted but a moment, as it soon crumbled to dust as if to mock me.

Ahh... No... Elisa's tuition...

In contrast to my anguish at the sparkling sand spilling from between my fingers, the alfar looked quite happy as they used a mysterious power to open the door.

“Ugh!” The view of what was hidden beyond was chilling enough to drain me of all the heat of combat that still lingered. The ceiling, walls, and floor were completely covered in indecipherable scribbling. Amidst the countless medicine cabinets and bookshelves was a workbench lined with unspeakable tools.

In the very back of the room, a lone girl stood chained against the wall. The scene exceeded my every expectation in its horror. Wrapped from head to toe in bandages, every inch of the cloth around her was covered in mad inscriptions that betrayed the depths of human folly. The dark gauze tightly wrapped around her malnourished frame, and both her wrists and ankles were chained—and on further inspection, I could see the cuffs stab into her flesh—to giant pillars on both sides. Finally, giant rivets in her chest and every limb nailed her to the wall behind.

I'd known that I was going to see the fate of a daughter imprisoned by her deranged father...but *this*? This was too much.

Cursed paper covered every bit of skin on what had once been this mansion's noble princess. Here stood a girl tormented by a madman for the sake of a “real” daughter that had never existed. Now, decades later, the poor girl remained forgotten in this abyssal basement—or rather, the changeling had been *left* here.

“Is she...”

“Alas, she is. Here is the other sister I would like you to save, but I didn't include her for your reward because...I wasn't sure if you could,” Ursula whispered, stepping into the room. She'd regained her mensch-like size from when we'd first met, and walked up to the pitifully crucified girl. “Poor, poor Helga. So fascinated with mortal life that you ended up like this.”

“Sorry... Lottie couldn't save you...”

The two alfar fluttered about the changeling for a minute and looked her over, until they eventually shook their heads. Their glistening eyes cast downward, sending an unhappy conclusion racing through my mind: we didn't make it.

“She isn't *dead*,” Ursula said, tracing her hand around the girl's face. Her melancholy turned to anger as she continued, “She's still alive—oh, they wouldn't *let* her die.”

Mind follows flesh; even an alfar would shift toward human sensibilities if they obtained a physical body. Soft and frail, our psyches could be cracked to the point of no return. An eternity of loneliness and torture was too much for the young girl, and so the alfar had shaken their heads. At this point, a coup de grâce was all the mercy we could offer.

“B-But she’s still alive, isn’t she?” I asked, my voice unintentionally shrill. My chest had been heaving up and down ever since I entered the room and saw the girl they called Helga. To come clean, I had projected Elisa onto her. One wrong move, and my sister could end up like this. This terrible sensation had followed me ever since we’d entered the first hidden room.

Faced with the worst-of-all-possible-worlds scenario that had been brewing in my mind, my heart creaked under the pressure. Logic faltered as my passions kicked in and cried out that I wanted to save the girl I’d likened to Elisa.

Intellectually, I *knew*. Ursula had said she was an optional objective—she’d given me my reward already knowing that Helga might be beyond rescue.

By all odds, she was just as shattered as the daemons that I had cut down on my way here. Her sistren of all people were the ones saying so. I had no room to object to their reasoning, and I *knew* that...but my wretched heart would not cease crying out: if she still had form, then *maybe there was a chance*.

“Unfortunately, we alfar cannot do anything. These bandages are soaked in the blood of elder dragons—without physical form, we are powerless to free her. Honestly, where in the world did he get his hands on this? Stabilizing phenomena in time is the sort of divine feat I’d expect from the age of gods.”

“But, but! Menschies with bodies can break it. Sooo...”

“I won’t hold it against you, no matter how things fall into place.”

I was the one who had to choose. The alfar put the decision in my hands, saying that they would hold no grudges regardless of what I chose to do—or how my choice played out.

And I...I...

[Tips] Flesh is a vessel for the mind, but the self adjusts to its vessel.

Torn to shreds, a large ego drifted in a tiny corner of an endless dream. An uncountable array of formless dreams floated by without pattern, dancing along until they disappeared into nothingness like bubbles in water.

A happy memory fluttered by—two, even.

The shadowed face of a man. Golden hair. Ice-blue eyes that popped through the blurred shadows of his face. A kind, deep voice that soaked into the ears. Large hands, a soft lap, the reassuring beat of his heart, and the faint smell of tobacco.

A birthday banquet. Custom-made clothes. A large doll. Sweet ice candy, a lakeside dinghy, and distant singing.

Such were the relics of the blissful days sailing by. Twisted and broken, the ego pieced itself together every so often to see these and smile. However, try as she might to collect happy times, these rare gems came to an end all too quickly. The most delectable of her memories could not sate her.

What remained was bitter.

The first painful memory: an unfamiliar tombstone; an interrogating voice; a repentant wail.

The second painful memory: a dark room; the sight of her beloved doll and clothes burning; a cold box of stone without so much as a bed.

The third painful memory: unending beratement; the flavor of rust; the odor of mud.

The fourth painful memory: the bitterness of medicine; sensations of paralysis; unbearable pain.

The fifth painful memory: her beloved golden hair, blue eyes, and deep voice; her detested sharp dagger, rusted saw, and hot iron.

The sixth painful memory, then the seventh, eighth, and ninth...

The broken self saw the world as something full of suffering. There had been a time when everything had overflowed with happiness, but that period was all too short. The joy she'd so desperately dug to find was a single plank floating in the rich sea of misery that was her ordeal.

The world was meant to be so happy. She had been born to be happy. She was supposed to know what happiness was—yet she did not. Trapped in an indefinite slumber that could hardly be called rest, the fragmented ego sank into sleep, awaiting the day she would awaken, dreading and longing for it.

Suddenly, a voice—one that she hated, yet one that she loved—called to her:

Good job, Helga. That's my girl, Helga. I'm so proud of you, Helga. You're growing up to be just like your mother, Helga.

Give me my daughter. You fiend. Did you think an elf could deceive me? You're going to give my daughter her body back.

She couldn't bear any more. She wished everything would just end; she wished everything would just go back to the way it used to be.

Infinite uncertainty enveloped the broken psyche as she drowned

in the dolor of depressing memories. Despite crying out for death, she could do nothing but continue sleeping. This continued forever. The sequence of grief repeated ad nauseam. No end was in sight, and she hardly wanted to look back to see where it had started.

Trapped in an eternal prison, the ego took note of a long-forgotten stimulus. The cold, interminable veil over the reality that had given birth to her hell had begun to tear.

She did not want to be freed: the world was crueler than her mind.

She wanted to be freed: the world was meant to be so happy.

The unhinged consciousness paired these antithetical concepts into a deranged harmony, as discordant as it was. Her desire for life and death fused together in a way that no other being on the planet could comprehend—thus we say she was broken.

Helga, the changeling that had lost her place as a daughter, was surfacing. From the perspective of someone inhabiting the material universe, she was awakening for the first time in over half a century.

How would her memories of love warp when bathed in memories of torture? Only those who were there to open her box would know.

[Tips] A line of thought that can be unraveled with reasoning cannot be called mad. True lunacy is incomprehensible by definition.

I decided to unpin the rivets that held the girl up like an entomological specimen and strip her of her bindings. I undid a tight section of the bandages on her head, slowly unveiling her face to the world. I had no idea if there was any meaning to my actions. I knew full well that this could simply be ridiculous wasted effort.

I merely hoped beyond hope that, among the countless futures Elisa could encounter, there would be just one more that had some kind of salvation at the end. My foolish prayer won out...even though I knew that the release of death may have been exactly that.

Before I had been reborn as Erich, my final days as Fukemachi Saku had been excruciating. The memory of death by early-onset pancreatic cancer drained the color from my face to this day. Every breath had been a living hell, and the relief the future Buddha had imparted upon me did little to assuage the agony of existence. Having experienced what could only be described as a harrowing end, I should have known that death was not always the worst of fates.

Discolored hair spilled forth from the undone gauze. What had presumably once been a beautiful chestnut color had faded, as if a thin layer of ice descended onto her head. Next came a skinny face befitting a nobleman's child. Judging from her appearance, she

seemed to be a few years my senior, and despite retaining a childish face, there were heavy bags under her eyes. The look of fear that had been frozen in time made my heart sink.

I touched her cheek to find that it was cold—here too, it was as if a frost covered her. With skin so icy, I could hardly believe she was breathing. *Can people even survive temperatures this low?*

“She’s almost an alf,” Ursula muttered.

“What?” I asked. The fairy of night must have been able to see something we couldn’t; she narrowed her red eyes at the sleeping girl.

“I can’t believe it. An alf who won a body, trying to return to her original form? Does this mean...”

Ursula’s muttering offered a glimpse of hope, but I didn’t get a chance to hear it until the end. As soon as I’d finished removing the cursed seal on Helga’s face, her eyes had opened—though I couldn’t describe her awakening as peaceful. Her eyelids snapped wide like someone who’d seen a terrible nightmare, and her irises could not settle on a focal point as each flickered about on its own.

“Ghghh!”

“Helga!” Ursula said.

“You’re awake?!” Lottie asked. “Helgaaa!”

The two fairies hurried over to their companion’s side in a fret, but she failed to say anything meaningful. Her groaning was mere noise, birthed from the expulsion of what air remained in her lungs. No matter how much the alfar shook her or screamed in her ear, she showed no sign of awareness.

Thinking that I’d failed and only caused her undue suffering, I nearly began to cry...when our eyes met. Her bleary gaze began to focus, and judging from how intently she stared at me, her brain seemed to be processing the image coming in through her eyes. Somewhere within, she was *alive*.

“Helga?” I asked, trembling.

“Fffgh...”

At long last, her groans took on some color. Her mouth opened ever so slightly, and I could see her tongue—which, I now realized, had also been bolted down, as if to say there was no part of her that could be left free—wriggling around in an attempt to convey something.

“Frgh, agh...”

The three of us cheered her on, clutching tightly onto our hope that she had survived in one piece. We prayed that she would show us a brilliant smile and thank us for saving her. All this time, I’d considered alfar to be terrifying and unknowable creatures, but I could tell from their passionate shouting that they, like us, cared deeply for their peers. I didn’t know if Ursula and Lottie had personal ties to her

or if they simply wanted their sistren to be happy, but they were invested all the same.

“Fah...ther?”

Yet we... Nay. I alone was made to realize the truth: *dreams are fleeting*.

The girl looked at me and called me father. That, by itself, was fine. Sometimes, the fuzzy vision and memory that accompanies the shift between sleep and waking causes people to mistake others for family. I’d done it myself; now and again, I’d get my twin brothers mixed up in the morning. But something was wrong here—horribly so.

“Ah... No! Father...please, please, no more. I’m sorry... It was me, I was wrong, please...”

Helga had been anchored to an era where the lord of this manor still stood in this room. Her delirium worsened: unable to hear our voices, her hair whipped back and forth as she jerked and thrashed against her restraints. I heard the sounds of snapping bones and tearing flesh as she broke free from her chains and the bindings began to slip off.

Patches of skin now peeked out from the gaps, causing me to swallow my breath. Scars ran across her at every angle; the seams made her look like a poorly patched up doll, evidence of unthinkable torture.

I had been naive. Could an immature soul retain its grip on sanity after experiencing such horrors at the hand of her beloved father? The answer was a resounding no.

Ramblings turned to screams that robbed all heat from the air around us. Deprived of its magical security system, this basement had been reduced to an unkept storage unit. Shackles flew, and an unbolted straitjacket was no match for a changeling’s power.

“Nooo!” Lottie screamed. Half an instant later, everything beside me was frozen. Had the sylphid not surrounded me with a lukewarm layer of air to protect me, I would have been too.

“Whoa?!”

“Urk! Helga!” Ursula shouted. “Calm down!”

“No! Father, stop!” Helga floated off the ground, surrounded by a swirling hailstorm that buried the room in snow. “Don’t kill me! Don’t break me! Don’t take *me* from me!”

Bookshelves cracked under the rapid change in temperature, and the racked vials burst as their contents turned to ice. The space around us turned into a subzero purgatory unfit for mortal survival. The psychotic changeling pleaded again and again for mercy as she subjected us to her own violence. At last, her powers took effect on things I’d never seen freeze before. The cracked stone flooring and scattered bits of glass turned to ice.

Oh no, at this rate... I steeled myself for the worst, when a particularly powerful breeze tore by me. Then, everything returned to the way it had been, as if nothing had happened at all.

“Huh? Wha?” Helga had disappeared, leaving only the terrible screams that echoed in my mind. I turned to see that I was not alone in my confusion: the alfar were just as astounded as me.

I had no idea where she’d gone, or why. I only knew one thing: I’d fumbled as badly as I possibly could have.

[Tips] Those who stray too far from their design can scarcely be called the same being as before.

Late Spring of the Twelfth Year (III)

Enemy

An antagonistic entity. Some come pre-made with source material while others are custom-made by the GM. At times, they employ powerful unique skills and/or traits to fulfill their purpose as living obstacles. Extra-thorough GMs can build up each and every important enemy with all the care of a player creating their PC.

The one throughline that brings all enemies together is the fact that they are all NPCs designed to forgo conversation.

After scratching her head in an unbecoming manner, Agrippina pushed her monocle back into place.

“I’ve had this boy for *ten days*,” she muttered. Her tone was a mixture of exasperation and awe as she curiously examined the damp basement she found herself in. Forcibly stripped of all its mystic meaning, the room was little more than an antiquated cellar, but the lingering traces of magic clinging to its walls were more than enough to impress her.

Here lay archaic tongues from every reach of the continent, a lost language devoted to a foreign god, and sacred glyphs intentionally miswritten to alter their purposes. The fruit of hope had ripened until it rotted off the tree, and Agrippina could taste the misguided beliefs and concentrated madness that had birthed such persistence. The methuselah shivered at the thought of a man doing all this for his daughter out of obsession alone; she doubted whether she could fixate on *herself* in this way, let alone another.

It could be argued that the rituals here had succeeded, in a sense. When her servant had Voice Transferred a frightened and panicked message asking her to take a look at something, Agrippina hadn’t expected him to bring her something so grand.

Looking back, the magus had first found the boy engaged in a massive brawl with a whole troupe of bandits, only for him to stumble across a captive fairy and broken changeling as soon as they set off. Ordinarily, this packed schedule of high-intensity events would be unthinkable.

Of course, every person comes across a handful of opportunities for great adventure in their life, but the numbers didn’t seem right here. Seeing her servant stumble over an unending torrent of fluke

events—each enough to sate the thrill-seeking palate of a normal person for the rest of their life—the methuselah couldn't help but feel as though the stars had been horribly misaligned on the night of his birth.

And if Agrippina's hunch was right, this episode would not end so easily. She'd teleported the boy in question back to the carriage, but that was no guarantee he'd stay out of trouble. If nothing else, the magus had an unshakable conviction that the boy would not wake to see the sunrise without something of import coming to pass.

It seemed likely that the defective changeling had wandered off after winning her freedom. In fact, one might assume she would want to put as much distance between her and this accursed site as physically possible. Logically, it made sense for her to flee, never to be seen again.

Agrippina had no interest in the havoc she might cause elsewhere. After all, there wouldn't be any way for someone to investigate the girl's origins. Yet her servant's density of contrivance in his life affairs as observed so far continued to vex her. While it was grating to borrow the words of the class of educated fool specialized in prophecy and the affairs of spirits, there was a saying at the college that perfectly suited her situation.

"Nine times the die offers one; the tenth mustn't bleed red...was it?"

The odds of rolling a one nine times out of nine are astronomically low. What, then, are the odds of rolling another on the tenth throw?

As a pragmatic realist of the School of Daybreak, Agrippina ought to have instantly answered one-sixth without an ounce of hesitation. However, statistical probability denoted reality as seen by gods at the end of an infinite existence—and only there, after transcending the bounds of realistic replication, did it achieve its flawless form. The movements of the hand, the slant of the table, and the imperfections of the die itself refuted the existence of an infallible one-in-six.

Believing that a one was destined to follow nine of its kind was absurd...yet Agrippina found herself feeling as much. While the proverb had various interpretations among the different schools at the college, at this moment, the methuselah could only believe in one: coincidence is dictated by what must be.

This blond boy with kitten-blue eyes had a sister who happened to be a changeling, and had left his village behind to help her. Immediately following this, he'd charmed an elf—inadvertently or otherwise. To top everything off, he now had found a changeling in a similar setting to his kin who had not been saved.

The pieces were too perfect; it was as if the gods had written the

script to his drama. To borrow the forms of Agrippina's beloved stories, the boy was fated to play out this tale. Had even a single beat been missing, his journey would not have been so foreboding. She felt alike to authors with delusions of grandeur who saw every piece and claimed that all had been for this moment...including her presence in this very room.

"Absurd."

The methuselah genius scoffed as she put an end to this tedious strand of thought. What did it matter that fate seemed to align? Even her measly century and a half was enough to know that the world was not so well put together. If it were, a recluse of her standard would not have been born to the unstrung kite that was her father.

Agrippina conceded that the present situation was an amusing string of unbelievable statistical oddities, but what implications lay beyond were none of her concern. All she had to do was steer things to suit her—this basement and that changeling both. People were the ones to roll the dice, and she would take the opportunity to misrepresent their result as she pleased.

First and foremost, she decided to dismantle the room. The space's aura polluted with sick affection paled in comparison to its scholarly value. From a certain lens, this was a treasure vault. Although the persistent frost had rendered some things unsalvageable, the cellar was still lined with curios a magus might find fascinating.

Agrippina had no doubt that the many researchers who'd been summoned by the crazed father had been twisted in their own way. She could find no other explanation for the sick, pained contortions of the mangled spells left behind.

While omens of calamity crept toward her, the magus elected to prioritize her own pleasure as she dove into the realm of knowledge.

[Tips] An experienced caster of space-bending magic can instantly warp to the location of a person carrying a suitable marker, no matter how far the target has moved...even with a massive carriage in tow.



A lone girl drifted in the boundless sky, soaring high above the clouds alongside a waxing moon. Her gaze was devoid of meaning as she peered up at the lunar body, and she showed none of the signs of sapient life.

Only hidden by horrific seals scrawled with curses, the scars running every which way across her starved body were a painful sight that dimmed her already diminished presence. Was there even a girl here at all? Perhaps the maiden beloved by all who knew her as Helga was no longer here—in her stead was a drifting shadow in her likeness.

Neither mensch nor alf, the girl was a jumbled mess that could scarcely understand her own emancipation as she obeyed her fey inclinations and floated through the air. For whatever reason, the growing moon called to her; she was drawn to it as those on the brink of death are still drawn to quench their thirst when offered water.

As she took in the long-forgotten glow of moonlight with her whole body, a bubble swam up in her mind, just like the ones that had interrupted her irregular, formless thoughts in sleep.

It was golden hair, glowing bright even in the dark. One association gave way to another, and another still. Golden hair begot blue eyes; blue eyes brought a deep voice. As more and more items accumulated, her memory of this fragmentary joy gave way to something that she had yet to attempt: *thought*.

“Father...” The hoarse voice of a young girl reverberated through the thin, forsaken air. Her first conscious word in over half a century triggered yet another lost memory to resurface...of happier days, with her loving father.

Maybe, she thought, my kind father has come home to retrieve me.

Impossible as this was, the fatigue and brain rot that had followed her out of the never-ending hell of her imprisoned mind left her incapable of noticing. Both the infinitesimal odds of her tormentor coming to reclaim her and the months and years she’d spent imprisoned escaped the muddy wreckage of her thoughts.

“Oh, father. Father!”

Once inflamed, her warped ideation spawned fantasies at an accelerated pace; she disturbed the settled muck at the bottom of her brain, unearthing a misshapen love that wedded the unique derangements of her mensch and alf halves.

“You’ve come for me! You even hugged me, and I...”

The broken self patched its missing portions with whatever fragments of thought were at hand: the boy she had gotten a single glimpse of overwrote a gap in her memory that belonged to the terrible pain she chose to toss away. The clouds around her gave way

to new shapes and forms as others of their kind combined and broke away; in the same vein, her recollection shifted with each passing moment.

The girl was loved. She had never been hurt. “Father” had come to take her home.

“Oh, I have to apologize! Father, I’m sorry. Father, oh father... *Father!*”

Her voice ranged wildly in pitch, but steadily grew sweeter in tone. Her crazed irises swayed about as a willfulness returned to her gaze. Once, her father had praised her gentle, droopy lids as the greatest reminder of her mother; the charm of yesteryear was nowhere to be found. All that remained was a straightforward insanity. Tears welled in the girl’s ice-blue eyes as she began to laugh.

“Father, oh father! Your Helga is coming! Together again! Let us be a happy family together, once more!”

Her memories were not certain enough to warrant clinging to, but having nothing else, the girl soared through the air with maniacal laughter. Neither the bolts of lightning running through the clouds nor the rain soaking her to the core could stop her—in fact, the water around her condensed into frozen chunks, only adding to her power.

“To that endless hill! Join me on the eternal hill of twilight! Where no one can part us again!”

Such was her birthright. Unable to comprehend her mensch or alfish roots as she was, the power dwelling within her needed no intent to manifest. Hers was the power of frost: where winter bid dreamers to a slumber without awakening, she was to herald its arrival.

This life-ending cold was the core of her being before she had ever taken form in a mensch womb. Frost was not as harsh as snow, yet far bleaker than mere cold; the reifalf who presided over it came from a family of winter spirits.

Bound by instinct, the fairy flew after the scent of nostalgia—toward he whom she had deemed beloved. The moon watched without comment as hysterical cackling scattered into every corner of the night sky.

[Tips] Each individual alf presides over some concept; those that rule over more abstract subjects are considered greater in power.

Staring up at the brimming midnight moon, I finally began to feel some semblance of peace.

Lady Agrippina had decided to stop the carriage to investigate the mansion. Canceling our reservation at the next inn, we’d looped back

around to the spot where I'd fought off the noon assault to camp out for the night.

Apparently the carriage had continued on for the inn after I'd set off, but things rapidly fell into place once I'd sent her a message detailing the situation. The madam had appeared out of her usual fray in space-time and tossed me back into the carriage from whence she came.

I simmered in the terrible pain of being left alone after a colossal mistake. I could feel my guts churning in the same way they had in my memories of white-collar life. That being said, I was so exhausted that I had to admit I was grateful too. Mixing the bit of medicine she'd thrown my way into my tea, I could feel the stinging pain in my body dissipate like a mirage.

Elisa was my only saving grace. Once she'd heard that we were to eat at the same table and sleep in the same bed for a night, her mood improved instantly. Although she'd seemed worried about the odor of blood that pursued me, she'd gone out like a light as soon as I tucked her in.

Unfortunately, I was so restless that I'd crawled out of bed to find myself here, taking in the night air. I thought back to the broken changeling I'd woken in the manor. Helga demanded so much of my mind that drowsiness did not bother to visit my weary psyche.

"Man..."

At the end of my wits, I ruffled my own hair. The golden color that skimmed the edges of my vision was a minor point of pride that I'd inherited from my mother; I wouldn't have thought I'd ever find it as unpleasant as I did now. While it was impressive that I'd managed to score some recessive traits from my parents, they'd proven to be nothing but trouble. *If I didn't have these looks that the alfar loved so much, would things have changed?*

"Tired from the long day, o Beloved One?"

A voice called me from behind as I tossed and turned dozens of possible futures in my mind. I didn't need to turn around to know the svartalf that had beckoned me to the lake house was sitting on the carriage.

"I'll have you know that you'd be wrong to apologize to me." Ursula had perfectly read my mind, to the point where my breath caught in my throat. *Why does everyone around me know exactly what's on my mind at critical moments like this?*

I wanted to apologize—to no one in particular—and go unforgiven. I wanted to be *blamed*.

From first principles, self-reproach is impossible to unload on one's own—otherwise there'd be no issue. I was searching for a vulgar means by which someone else would condemn me in my stead. It was

far easier to act like a pitiful wretch forever waiting to be forgiven by another than to truly forgive myself.

I was deplorable: my mind twisted miserably at the consequences of my own actions...but there had been no right answer from the start. Had I cut her down then and there, I surely would still regret my choice.

“Besides, I thought I told you?” Without any warning, the svartalf gently hugged me from behind. The ticklish scent of flowers, the melting sensation of her soft flesh, and the warmth soaking into my neck from her thin fingers commanded my attention. “I won’t hold it against you no matter how things fall into place, remember?”

What a kind thing to say; so kind, yet so merciless.

She did not forgive—only accept. Although I thought her treatment was crueler than even what my sins deserved, the truth was that a single drop of acceptance was enough to ease my pain. To coddle is a sweeter love than mere consideration...but I couldn’t let her spoil me. I had a feeling that I would never recover if I did.

“Thanks.” Yet I did not refuse her, for I was not strong enough to tear away from another’s kindness.

Ugh...I wish I were stronger. Forty total years, and this? I’m no better than any other brat my age.

My heartrending worthlessness nearly brought me to tears. I took hold of the hand that dangled in front of my chest. As I squeezed at her warmth, Ursula curled her fingers into mine. The damp passion that I’d been holding back in my eyes finally gave way and dropped onto the back of my palm...as a crystal of ice.

“Wha—”

Instantaneously, the tranquil spring night began to stir. The pleasant temperature suddenly dropped to biting cold, causing my skin to crawl beneath my thin sleepwear. Birds took panicked flight from nearby trees, and I could sense desperation in the beasts fleeing the area. All of them were being chased by the unbidden winter, and the terrible slumber without awakening that accompanied its cold.

“Why in the world?” Ursula muttered.

I didn’t need the svartalf’s mumbling to know what had happened. I’d already experienced this chill that left a layer of frost on the soul itself: *she* was coming—the wreck of a changeling that had been sealed away in the mansion.

Looking up, I could see a silhouette floating in front of the moon. The white light shining past her was just as crisp as the overwhelming cold that surrounded the living embodiment of my crimes.

“Hehe...” Helga, the reifalf, was here. As soon as she noticed me, her dignified visage warped into an enraptured smile. With both hands squarely on her cheeks, she called for me as if to advertise her

delusion to the world. "I found you, *father*..."

While it was a matter of course for someone locked away in such awful conditions for so long, seeing her again drove home how irreversibly dysfunctional she'd become. She seemed incapable of comprehending that the lord of the manor had left this realm long before his estate fell into disrepair.

Furthermore, I'd seen rotting paintings decorating the main hall: beyond the superficial colors of our hair and eyes, I had nothing in common with the noble homeowner. And in between the portrait of a high-strung yet dignified man and a gentle-looking brunette, there had been an empty space that would have just fit another frame of the same size.

"Let's go home, *father*. To our home, on that twilight hill."

Helga was so beyond help that she had to conflate a total stranger with her father in order to cope. How easy it would be to call her by her name and embrace her like her father had once done...but what then?

I could not play along with her forever. I, Erich, was a citizen of Konigstuhl canton, fourth-born son to Johannes, elder brother to Elisa, and servant to Agrippina du Stahl. I couldn't cast aside all I'd sworn to protect to hug this lost soul tight.

"Beloved One..."

"I know, Ursula."

I cut off the fairy's worried whispers by rising to my feet, and slipped away from her arms. Naturally and without a hint of anxiety, I approached the floating girl. Unequipped and unarmed, I advanced, looking as defenseless as I could.

Pitiful as this is to admit, keeping my calm was almost more than I could manage. My legs threatened to give out at any moment, and I couldn't feel any force in my tightly balled fists. Buried in guilt and remorse, my mind pleaded for the escape of death. But this was the consequence of my actions, and I had to be the one to bring it to an end.

Had I not been so soft, Helga may not have suffered like this. Thus, I too had to suffer: after worrying to the end of worry, after hurting to the end of hurt, I *needed* to see this through without any more regrets. The price of foolishness could not be loaned away, and she had endured enough of my debts.

"Oh, father! It really is you! You're here to hug me, aren't you? You're here to accept me, aren't you? You're here to dispel that horrific dream!"

Helga smoothly dove through the air toward me. I stretched out my arms to hold her...as I used an Unseen Hand to pull the fey knife out of my sleeve and placed it in my right hand. I'd hoped she

wouldn't come tonight, but I'd prepared myself, knowing that an event this major would not end so haphazardly.

Just as no session can end after a single random encounter, it was safe to assume every story continued until its conclusion. A rolling stone cannot stop until the hill ends or it shatters into pieces.

I'd repented plenty. What I was about to do absolutely could not be something I'd regret. I looped this mantra over and over again in my head.

The distance closed, and soon Helga was in reach of a hug. This perfect opportunity was my final shot. Failure was not an option: otherwise, she would lose her last chance to be put to rest without knowing the end had come.

In the fateful moment, I thrust my dagger forward without hesitation, aiming for the neck. This weakness was not unique to mensch: only those exceptions who held the carapace of flesh in no high regard could shrug off an attack to their vitals. Trapped in the body of a mensch, a changeling was plenty vulnerable here.

"Fah...ther?"

At the last minute, my motion to embrace her was cut short with a flashing blade as I slit her skinny throat. It was far from a pleasant sensation, but I refused to let that deter my follow-through; anything less would be inhumane.

I had cut a gash so wide that any more would have cleanly beheaded her. There was no possible way someone could survive a wound of this size...but that was all there was to it.

"What?!"

Without a drop of blood, my knife slipped out of her with even less resistance than cutting air. Looking down at the spotless karambit, my fatal mistake set in. Helga had long abandoned the realm of mortal life.

"Oh, father, why?! Are you really... Huh? But no, that wasn't real, that was a nightmare...but it was. And father has a knife. Father, oh, father, aughhh!"

Mad ramblings spilled from her open neck, and the icy blue of her eyes contrasted with the crimson tears streaming down her cheeks.

Oh, dammit! Are all my rolls really this bad today?!

As soon as I rued my misguided judgment, the air around Helga exploded. The biting cold nipped at my skin, but not as harshly as the razored pellets of hail whizzing by in the wind that sent me flying.

Yet I was far from dead; I hardly felt any pain as I rolled off my fall. There was only one explanation for the fact that I'd been spared the storm's wrath without so much as a broken finger.

"Ptooie! That was close!" I don't know when she'd gotten in there, but Lottie poked out from my inner pocket and had created a massive

cushion of air to protect me. Without her, I would have been sliced to bits by the icy blades whirling around.

“Alas, poor Helga is lost,” Ursula said.

“Helga!” Lottie shouted. “Stop! Don’t get angrier! You won’t be an elf or a humanfolk anymore—you’ll be something really bad!”

The girl in question was writhing in ways that exceeded the bounds of physical motion as she metamorphosed into something beyond human and fey reckoning alike. I had no way of telling whether this was spurred on by her mental state or the treatment she’d received, but one thing was for certain: if I didn’t put her to rest here, then she would suffer *even more*.

“Ursula, Lottie, back me up!”

I switched gears and prepared for combat. This was no longer an attempt to catch her unawares; the scene had switched to a full-on encounter.

With an iron grip on the fey knife, I dashed forward, casting Unseen Hand—but it wasn’t the same as before. When the madam had sent me back to the carriage, I’d prepared for the worst with yet another modification. So far no other spell matched up in terms of performance ceiling. Without upgrades it was really only good for nabbing utensils that’d fallen behind the stove and such, but cleverly tuned to a general use case, it was a magic utility knife.

My battle with the ogre daemon had bestowed a tremendous sum of experience on me. I’d realized this in part after my run-in with the kidnappers: any activity that risked my life yielded juicy returns. Seeing the surging number on my status sheet, I’d spared no expense, knowing that something like this might happen.

I constructed an Unseen Hand: it was thicker, longer...and more numerous. One by one, a full six phantom limbs took shape around me. They all reached over to the top of our carriage to collect my spoils of war: the gargantuan sword and shield of my dining room foe.

The ogre’s equipment must have been made of special materials, as I hadn’t been able to get it off the ground with my current strength, no matter how much mana I poured into my spell. Musing over the conundrum, I had reached an epiphany. *There’s an add-on to summon an additional Hand, so what if I just stack a bunch of them together?*

My bet paid off. The hideous weapons that had once nearly split me like fruit now hung in midair, eager to serve. I brought the shield to my left side and the sword to my right—from afar, it must have looked like I was a normal boy with the arms of a giant.

If I had to give this combo a name, it would be the Invisible Behemoth. Unfortunately, I couldn’t justify carrying around these ludicrously heavy items everywhere I went, so I could only do this if I happened to come across massive weapons I could “borrow.” My

original plan was actually to equip each and every Hand with its own sword, but the sudden encounter had changed that image into something far grander.

Being the mensch child that I was, the shield was practically a mobile wall that completely covered me as I advanced. Slanted to one side, I used it to divert the forceful gale away from me at an angle. It groaned under the tempest's pressure.

What terrified me above all else was that my fingers were growing numb, even with Lottie's barrier. Helga was turning her surroundings to winter just by virtue of *being*, likely evidence of her power as the alf she once was.

I nearly buckled more than a few times as I battled the cyclone to inch forward. All the while, a horrid screaming pierced into my brain far louder than the howling wind ever could. Helga's cries sounded like someone had filed down a psyche and scattered its powdered remains on the breeze. Her voice may have been a spell in and of itself; out of nowhere, a handful of shadows rose up in the storm, totally unaffected by the whirlwind around them.



With my meager command of language, I struggle to describe those abominable shades. They were misshapen dolls crafted from chunks of ice and scattered tree trunks, not dissimilar from childish attempts at shaping clay. These hooded silhouettes were clumsily formed at best, except for their dreadfully polished hands.

Their arms tapered off into saws, drills, knives, hammers, and weapons of every sort—all familiar. Like the well-worn instruments of torture that had been left in the cellar, these hooded figures were a manifestation of her past. The mages and magia that had tormented her so now took icy form as her weapon.

Helga simply imagined what had frightened her and tried to use it against me. I could offer no knowing smile, despite understanding her naive intentions. Her minions were multiplying so rapidly that I gave up keeping count in an instant.

Not good. If I don't stop them, they'll attack the carriage!

The disfigured frozen dolls clumsily dashed outward. They didn't concentrate their efforts on me; these chaotic sprinters merely tried to destroy whatever they could get their hands on. They were driven by a fittingly juvenile notion of violence.

Pitiful as this was, I could not fight in this cyclone. I had to step away from the strongest portion of the gale to have any hope of wielding my weapons properly. Putting down a lone girl was one thing, but fighting off hordes of enemies was impossible like this.

"There is no need to worry, Beloved One." I turned toward the whisper in my ear to find Ursula had returned to her minimized state and taken a seat on my shoulder. "Allow me to show you a svartalf's true power. They don't need to be *alive* for me to blind them."

A massive crash rang out. I looked over in surprise to see that two of the shades had smashed right into one another. The sight of these monstrosities aimlessly running into each other at full speed only to explode into ice was heartrendingly horrific.

If I tried to fight someone that could do this, I would lose on the spot.

Soaking in the awesome power of the fey to my very core, I steeled myself and swung the ogre's huge blade. Without the wit or skills to dodge, the shadows shattered like glass figurines.

Whew, it looks like I'll manage. Armed with newfound confidence, I mowed down the disoriented puppets—on their own, they turned out to be little threat. The devastating violence of my greatsword needed no finicky skill to wreak havoc. Unblockable weight swung in a wide arc was a recipe for destruction.

However, I came to notice a flaw as I defended the carriage. Whether I was swinging my sword or bracing with my shield, my body would shift ever so slightly to match the movement. The free

movements of my actual arms betrayed my inability to impeccably control multiple Hands. Similar to the intuitive leaning of a child playing a racing game, I was reflexively mimicking the movements I saw.

This was less than ideal. For the moment, I only had two things in Hand and no major weapons physically equipped, but this would not do for my optimal use case. Clearly, an upgrade to Parallel Processing was in order; I couldn't let a fault like this put me in danger next time.

That was, of course, if I lived to see a next time. Even with Ursula's help, I was barely hanging on, and the inexhaustible army was encroaching on us. My tactical retreat to avoid the brunt of Helga's tempest had driven me into a corner, surrounded on all fronts.

Cutting the approaching foes down was easy: a mindless slash or bash with either weapon did the trick just fine. I was reminded of the video games of my past life where levels would be covered in countless fodder units waiting to be slaughtered. However, as reminiscent as this scene was, I could hardly classify it as a musou game.

Blowing these icemen away was anything but refreshing. Every second I spent like this was time that the infinite legion could shrug off casualties and continue their saturation attack. Simply put, I didn't have enough firepower. They'd reach the carriage soon enough—with the sleeping princess I had to protect still inside.

Growing panic dulled my form, and the heavy mana expenditure of wielding two humongous chunks of mass went to my head. *This is bad. At this rate...*

"Would somebody mind explaining how my little servant finds his way into trouble every time I blink?"

In the *literal* blink of an eye, a black ball of death tore through the swaths of silhouettes and erased the better part of the swarm. They neither shattered nor crumbled; no, they simply disappeared into thin air. Whirling around, I saw my employer atop her own vehicle.

"I returned sensing the use of magic, and perhaps for good cause. Why, look at how *tattered* you are." Lady Agrippina's trademark boredom in the face of a hopeless challenge stemmed directly from her unshakable confidence—and in this moment, nothing could comfort me more. "Still, this is quite the spectacle. What *is* that? I can't even begin to fathom how a changeling could become *this*."

Helga was still thrashing about, totally oblivious to the dent in her forces. The madam eyed her dubiously. Her gaze was devoid of scholarly interest; the prodigal researcher merely looked disgusted at the alien sight before her.

"How anything can continue living after straying so far from their worldly design is beyond me," she said. Not even Agrippina du Stahl

could find purpose in Helga's existence. "You certainly have a knack for finding strange ones. To think you'd charm a mangled being at the end of its line. Are you positive that you aren't cursed?"

Her heartless description nearly got a rise out of me, but I didn't have the time or energy to yell at her. Still...it was clear that even the magus, with all her wisdom, considered Helga a lost cause. She hadn't said so explicitly, but I could tell from her voice that she had no mind to let the girl go.

"Well enough," she said. "A bother is a bother. I shall—"

"W-Wait, please!" I screamed.

"Hm?" The madam paused, moments away from completing the spell that would bring this all to an end.

You can't. It won't mean anything if you do it.

I had been the one to begin this catastrophe; I had to be the one to end it. Why else would Ursula and Lottie be twiddling their thumbs helping me? Either of them could annihilate me hundreds of times over...but they too must have thought this was the best ending Helga could hope for.

That was why the alfar had left it to me. They'd said that they wouldn't hold it against me no matter how things turned out: I'm sure that included a failed future where I caved at the hands of the broken changeling. Fairies say things that sound sweet, but their values are simply irreconcilable with our own.

"Do as you will. I have nothing to lose either way," Lady Agrippina said after a moment's pause. She sighed and listlessly took a seat on the edge of the carriage, crossing her slender legs with grace. Pulling her beloved pipe out of a hole in reality, she added, "I shall take care of the rear. The books say to let children have their freedom, after all."

"My deepest thanks!"

As soon as my master accepted my selfish request, I heard the low growl of those pitch-black orbs all around me. Knowing their power, it was a great reassurance to have them on my side; still, I couldn't help but fret about the thought of tripping into one.

There were ways of carefully modifying spells to prevent friendly fire, but...I questioned whether she was the type to worry about the front guard. While she would probably avoid collateral damage for efficiency's sake, I could easily imagine her telling me that it was *my* responsibility to dodge.

Regardless, the fact that I no longer had to worry about my flank meant that all that was left for me to—

"Mr. Brother?"

I heard the creak of the carriage door and the angelic voice that accompanied it as clear as day despite the raging winds. As I turned, I

heard Lady Agrippina mutter, “Oh dear,” only to see Elisa trying to climb down from the open doorway.

Wrapped only in simple sleepwear and carrying an oversized pillow, she must have just woken up from all the commotion. When she’d realized I wasn’t by her side, her first instinct was to come look for me. I’d only intended to step out for a moment, so I’d left the door unlocked; Lady Agrippina clearly hadn’t accounted for this either, seeing as she hadn’t picked up my slack with her magic.

“Elisa, stay inside! It’s dangerous!”

“But, but! Mr. Brother, it’s scary! Who’s that?”

My attempts to shoo her back into the carriage were futile as Elisa waddled over on her little legs.

“**AAAUUUUGHHHH?!**”

The piercing wail that escaped Helga’s lungs conveyed a deeper emotion than the cackles, groans, and screams that had preceded it. The abyssal pain of her soul knew no name but *despair*. Helga had seen the one thing that should have forever evaded her gaze. If she truly believed me to be her father, then how would her mind twist the sight of me with another young girl?

You know the answer.

I immediately abandoned the ogre’s sword and rerouted my freed Hands to wrap around Elisa. I pulled her scrawny frame tight to me and put my back against the shield to prop it up against the worsening gale. As the pangs of despair assaulted our ears, we could do nothing but hold out against the ripping cyclone.

[Tips] The spells alfar naturally cast encroach on the territory of miracles. In fields related to their own bubble of authority, they can practically bring about natural disasters.

Did the pain come from her body, or was it a parting gift from the lifeless vestige of her mind? With her neck nearly severed, she could not understand.

She was supposed to be happy. She was supposed to go back. She was supposed to put an end to this nightmare. She was supposed to never have to say those cursed words again:

“I am not your daughter. I’m sorry for stealing Helga away.”

Helga was herself. She had only ever seen her mother in paintings, but she looked just like her. There hadn’t been anyone else born to her pretty mother and her beloved father. Everyone she asked would always tell her what a wonderful, kind person her mother was—and *she looked just like her*.

Yet one day, her father had cast Helga aside. On that fateful day when her heart began to flutter and she floated into the air, Helga had

been happy. She took to the sky like the fairies and angels of the sagas her father had hired poets to recite from time to time. With a pure heart, she was sure her adventure was going to begin.

Alas, reality was different. A quiet unease draped over the manor, forever changing her happy home. Everything Helga had was taken from her; she was locked in a lonely room in the west wing.

And after that? She didn't want to remember. Besides, she didn't need to. That had all been a terrible, terrible nightmare. It was. But then, why had her father cut her neck with a knife?

No amount of thought could solve this riddle—all it did was rekindle memory after memory of torture at the hands of a father that did not exist. *Stop*, she screamed, *you're lying!* Yet her soundless voice failed to abate the awful visions. She used every ounce of the unfamiliar power bubbling inside her to blast everything away in a frozen gust, but still the nightmare remained.

Helga begged and pleaded for these unacceptable memories to disappear alongside he who resembled her father. Wringing out every last drop of herself to do so, she still could not end it all.

I wish the world would rot away, and take me with it.

As the patchwork soul screamed in agony, it caught a glimpse of a young girl. She had pretty golden hair. She had cute brown eyes. She was small and thin. Something about the girl reminded Helga of her father, and of the fleeting happiness of days gone by.

Who was she? Why was she so close to her father? Why did she nuzzle against him so? That was *Helga's* place...and she would not give it to anyone.

As cognition twisted reality to fit itself, the ego elected to off-load the responsibility onto another: everything had been that girl's fault.

It's all because of her. She stole my father. She tricked him. That's why he was mean to me! This new character had never appeared in her memory and could not be written in now, but the fragments of her heart could not connect the dots. With more hatred than ever before, she exploded with power to expunge the unpleasant sight before her.

Sharp, hard icicles flurried in a fatal whirlwind with the sole wish of mincing all that entered it. The storm danced faster and faster in the palm of her hand, and she unleashed it with a wail that embodied a sublime, ineffable suffering.

As her senses expanded, she began to perceive the world in ways a mensch could never dream of. The fury of the tempest was like a second skin. Frost settled onto everything, but amidst the sensation of draining heat, one thing remained standing.

Helga did not mind that the carriage had moved far away before she knew it. While the perfect composure of the woman sitting on top of it brushed against her sensibilities at a disagreeable angle,

destroying the vehicle had been the least of her concerns.

Behind an upright slab of wood and metal, she *felt* a final cluster of heat. They weren't dead. They *still* weren't dead. Both the vile girl who'd stolen away her father and the father that had so easily been tricked still drew breath.

Hm? Do I hate my father? No, of course not. I love and respect him from the bottom of my heart.

Then who is that? My father went somewhere far, far away. Is that him?

Father left because he hated me, but that was a dream, so he's still here, but that can't be my father because—

Like a gear with teeth too worn to lock into place, Helga's thoughts spun in circles, doomed to an eternity without conclusion. So lost in the pits of her mind, she could not even recognize that the endless font of mana that she'd let loose was pushing her body to the brink of collapse.

Everything distorted into an unintelligible mess. But then...she realized something. Could those two actually be her and her father, from long ago? When she had been sad or hurt, she remembered being held just like that.

The earnest wish that she might return to those arms naturally weakened the winter gale. However, the shard of nostalgia that empowered a speck of her sanity was not the only reason: she had torn through the mental block of self-preservation and continued to discharge her rapidly dwindling mana.

Just as the storm began to let up, the ogre's shield gave out. Helga's father—nay, a golden boy whom she did not know—rushed forward, leaving behind a sword large enough to shield his tiny companion. Even in the wavering tempest, the hail flying about cut his skin like a million daggers. Yet the boy held firm, charging headlong toward the floating changeling.

The ice sheared his skin and hair and tore open his flesh—yet still he pressed on. All the while, the two of them locked eyes. With a gaze free of any kind of hatred or bloodlust, the boy leapt toward her.

“Oh,” Helga said.

His eyes were so kind, yet so foreign. Her father's eyes had been a cooler, translucent blue. The darker tone of his kitten-like eyes was a color she'd never seen before...but they were so very warm and gentle.

It didn't hurt; she didn't suffer; she wasn't scared. To think, she had hated blades so much back then.

Curiously enough, Helga felt very calm. Her body shrieked in pain and her irreparable psyche continued to wail, but her soul alone was gazing at a cloudless sky—a sky not unlike what she saw as the storm clouds parted.

As she stared at the beautiful moon, she could feel the strange shape of a knife pierce through her accursed bindings and plunge into her chest. Her body did not bleed, but something in her heart felt incredibly warm.

Enveloped in the tender heat of the end, the girl slowly drifted to earth, unshackled from her eternal bonds. For the first time in decades, she felt peace as she closed her eyes.

[Tips] Death is the great equalizer for all those with souls.

The winds whipped at me and I squeezed Elisa tight, desperately looking for the faintest chance. My treasured sister clung to me with welling tears of terror, and as I felt her paltry heat on my skin, the whole of my mind was taken up by one thought: *I'm a soft fool*.

What did I say when I had executed those six daemons? I had proclaimed that saving them was beyond me—that to put them out of their misery was for the best.

Look at me now.

I had been a blind idiot *pretending* to understand. As soon as I had come across a pitiful girl, I bent. I'd ignored the fact that the alfar had already forsaken her, instead clinging to the preposterous hope in the back of my mind that told me I could save her.

Of course I had. I'd convinced myself that reality, too, was soft on young girls mistreated by the world. How many times had my efforts to help people like her been rewarded in my campaigns?

Reality did not care. A cracked cup cannot hold wine, and her broken heart could not be repaired. There were no convenient miracles, no turns of fate to restore her sanity, and no cheap items that could bring her back from the brink.

I had done this to her. This was my penance for indulging in sweet fantasy, and I would see it through if it took the last of my breaths away. How could I call myself a good brother when my half-baked resolve had put Elisa in danger? How could I call myself an adventurer ready to set off? I wanted to go back in time to tear out my own tongue and beat myself to death with these two hands. Assailed by the cold, I trembled for no other reason than rage.

Suddenly, the storm receded. While the winds were still harsh, they were nothing like what they had been a moment before.

"She's running out of mana," Ursula said. "Of course she is—she can't overstep her bounds forever..."

"Reifalfs are only supposed to call for wintertime or make it stronger," Lottie said. "Storms and ices are for bigger alfs to do..."

Helga was growing weaker: if I held out—if I *let* myself hold out—she would die of her own accord.

Oh, please no. Anything but that.

“Ursula, Lottie, I have a request.”

“What is it, Beloved One?”

I had a will—nay, a duty. I knew exactly how painful it was to run out of mana as a mensch. Then what of an alf? How harrowing would it be for one of these sentient bundles of magical energy to chisel away at her own existence until she dissolved into nothing?

“I want you to protect Elisa.”

Helga had gone through enough: her life was a tale of nothing but pain. For her to suffer until her final moment was just too much.

“I suppose we don’t have a choice.”

“Yup! We can’t say no to you, Lovey One!”

The two fairies exchanged glances and smiled for my pitiful sake.

“Elisa,” I said, “can you promise me something?”

“Mr. Brother? What?”

“Until I come back to get you, don’t move a muscle.”

I pulled my sister’s sobbing face out of my bosom and balled her up beneath me. The shield was at its limit, but Elisa was small enough to fit behind the ogre’s sword with a little fey help. It was a race: would the alfar’s blessings come first, or would the shield crack early? Without waiting for the answer, I left it all to fate and sprinted forward.

Even now, the storm was deadly. Frost robbed my sense of touch and jagged hailstones scored me at every angle—but what of it? I could endure the pain. With what mana I could spare, I opened my Unseen Hands wide to shield me; then I laid them flat as stepping stones.

I’m sorry, Helga. It’s all my fault. I will forever think of you and apologize; never again will I make this mistake.

I’m so sorry.

Helga, I will never forgive myself. So I ask that you do the same. No matter who else dares to absolve me, you and I...

I stared into her wavering eyes until the end of the end, carving her into my very soul. At long last, I thrust the fey knife into her small frame, making certain to pierce the crux of her being.

[Tips] The vital organ containing a demonfolk’s mana stone is found next to the heart. In the same vein, many creatures anchor their physical presence in their chest.

Postface

Finale

The final scene of a session. No matter the path the journey has taken, this is the final stop. Whether the night concludes with the PCs' joyous victory or sorry defeat, the ending always comes.

TRPGs are unfinished scripts with no guaranteed payoff, and the ending is the ultimate example. The lack of a guaranteed "happily ever after" is one of the harsh realities of tabletop games.

Held in caring arms, the girl closed her eyes and expelled a deep, long breath. Something told her that she would not draw many more.

Still, she did not suffer. Even as her hands and feet began to dissolve away, she felt no pain—only peace. The boy who had held her as they fell from the heavens was so very warm, and she could feel the kindness in his pretty blue eyes.

"Excuse me...young sir?"

After being cut down, she finally managed to see him for what he was. He wasn't her father at all—just a poor stranger wrapped up in this mess.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm very tired," she said.

To begin with, the two looked nothing alike. Her father's hair was much longer and a dimmer shade of gold, like the glow of a moonlit night. The boy was far younger, and even their voices were completely different.

Yet when he held her like this, it felt like she was back in her father's arms. That made the girl happy.

"I...I'm sure you are. If you're tired, you should rest."

The boy sounded like he was holding back tears. In fact, she heard him sniffle soon after, so he didn't just sound like it; he was surely fighting the urge to cry. The girl thought this was silly. There was no need for him to hold back, and even less need for him to cry. After all, she felt blessed.

"I think I might," she said.

Truthfully, the girl wanted to thank him. During her outburst, an ending this tranquil had been unimaginable. What little reason she had commanded in that state had told her that her finale would be painful. This was much better than she could have ever hoped.

“But,” she said, “before that...”

The girl wanted to thank him, but didn't. She had a feeling that the boy would become even sadder if she did. She would rather see his pretty eyes beam with joy than sink into sadness. Though she did not know why, this wish came from the bottom of her heart.

“Would you sing me a song?” she asked. “When I go to bed...I sleep wonderfully when somebody sings to me.”

In place of gratitude, she made a request. Nobility hardly ever slept with their parents, but the girl's father had often brought her to bed to sing her lullabies.

“I'm no singer,” the boy said.

“I don't mind,” she replied. “I'd just like you to... That's all.”

The girl thought she was wishing for more than she was due. Here she was, already enjoying a serene end; who was she to ask for a song on top of that?

“O quiet night—o gentle night.”

And yet he sang. The girl had never heard these simple, unembellished lyrics before, but she had a feeling that the good common people of the land sang this song to put their children to bed.

“O moonlit night—let your caring arms of light hold us—let sleeping souls rest.”

The boy sang, and he went so far as to pat her head. His hand was smaller and harder than the one in her memory, but it filled her with contentment all the same.

The girl truly felt like she was falling asleep as she melted away. After her limbs faded to dust, the rest of her body began turning into ashen flecks, dancing through the air, never to return to earth. The empty bindings piled onto themselves, cursing the girl who had escaped their clutches.

“Good night,” she whispered happily.

At long last, she had found the gentle slumber that would hold her forevermore. As her head finally disappeared, a single stone rolled onto the boy's lap. It was a gemstone colored with the same ice blue that the girl had adored so.

The last vestige of the changeling that had once been loved as Helga gleamed proudly in the moonlight, as if to say this is how it was meant to end.

[Tips] When a great being meets its end, powerful emotion can coalesce into a physical trace of their existence. These exceedingly rare crystals of sentiment will surely protect whoever wields it with the same passionate will that created it.



One Full Henderson

Ver0.2

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

There is no need for one person to suffer misfortune for the sake of another's blessing; the inverse is just as true.

The tale that follows is not from the time line we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

One Full Henderson Ver0.2

1.0 Hendersons

Little Elise felt nothing but regret. No one was going to look at her, but she had spent so long styling her hair that she had run late. Her grandmother had given her a charm to ward off wolves, but she had forgotten it at home. Everyone always stressed that she was not to wander into the deep woods surrounded by tall pines, but she had come in search of strawberries.

Had she not done these things—or rather, had *one* of these elements been missing—she would be at home enjoying supper with her family. With the sun long gone and the moon obscured by the towering forest, Elise had lost her way and found herself on the wrong end of dinner.

The girl stared into starving eyes and knew that she'd met her end. She'd peered into golden irises like these at play with the two dear pooches waiting for her at home, but these feral wolves had no mind to give her a friendly lick: dark joy at chancing upon such choice prey showed through in their gazes.

The pack circled her, not pouncing right away. Wolves are cautious creatures, and a mensch child sits on the larger end of their range of typical quarry. Furthermore, they knew that these small bipeds often had larger companions nearby, and those were not to be taken lightly. For wild animals without any concept of medicine, even the smallest wound could be fatal. Careful observation was key to survival.

Eventually, the beasts instinctively registered that there was no larger version of the trembling girl hiding in wait, and the girl was little threat herself. With a mark as easy as this lying in front of them, the wolves took action. Their howls rang out like cheers as one of their kind stepped forward: a large, brawny specimen.

The alpha female that led this pack's hunts knew well that even the weakest of prey could cause serious injuries if they struggled. Thus, her *modus operandi* was to settle things in a single bite, leaving no time for her mark to flail about. She pounced on the girl—only to be swatted away by a golden flash cutting through the night.

The wolf slammed to the ground with a cloud of dust and rolled a handful of times before barely righting herself. She prepared to lead a chorus of howls to shoo off the invader that had interrupted her

meal...until she gazed upon his empyrean beauty.

Without any forewarning, a dazzling golden wolf had shot out of the thicket. His glowing coat dispelled the dark with the harvest moon's own radiance, and his threatening eyes were a clearer blue than a cloudless summer sky.

This lone wolf's air of majesty stood in contrast to the alpha and her pack. The lesser canines lost their will to fight in an instant. Where intelligent races made decisions with reason, these beasts listened to their gut; it whispered in their ears that to fight here would end with their one-sided slaughter.

The great wolf's gaze remained steadfast as the pack slowly backed away. When the individual wolves turned tail to flee, he did not give chase. He let them slink into the night and continued to stare off into the woods until he was sure they would not return.

At long last, all the lesser wolves were gone, and the divine hound turned to face Elise. Despite staring straight into his pure blue eyes, the young girl's brain could not process what she saw into cause for fear. Her only word for this glorious, godly figure was, "Pretty..."

The creature was just too far above her. Faced with a being like this, there was no *point* to cowering in terror. Just taking in his magnificence took everything for a measly mensch like her. His lunar glow was nearly blinding as he took a step toward her. Between the row of swords that lined his mouth, a tongue slipped out and lapped Elise's tears from her deep blue eyes.

Curiously, the large beast lacked the unmissable odor of a living thing. His tongue was pillowy and free of slobber, and when Elise felt it on her cheek, something inside her snapped. She reached her threshold for stimulus for the day, and quickly conked out.

How long she slept, no one knew. She simply snoozed on, enveloped in a mysterious warmth and the sweet scent of a flower she'd never smelled before. When she opened her eyes, all she could see was a delicate gold hue.

"Eek?!"

The wolf had curled himself up to protect her from the dark of night, the cold of the forest, and the menacing creatures lurking within.

When the wolf noticed Elise's awakening, his massive frame rose to release the girl. The chill of midnight made the small girl shiver. The wolf had been warm even in the night breeze, and his departure from her side left her feeling like the whole world had abandoned her.

But the wolf did not leave. Quite the opposite: he was crouching down and peering into her eyes. He craned his neck low, as if to command her to get on.

"You're...helping me?"

The wolf did not nod at Elise's nervous question. His blue eyes simply glimmered. As the girl timidly mounted him, the beast rose with such grace that she hardly felt him move at all. Each step was carefully trod; this was far more comfortable than the horse she'd ridden on her father's lap.

After a short stretch spent gently rocked by the wolf's steady footwork, Elise realized that they were on a familiar path that she'd prayed all night to see. She'd tried and failed to find this very road for what felt like forever, and the wolf had trampled over her fate of lonesome eternity in mere minutes.

I can go home! Her damp eyes shone with joy and the legs wrapping around the wolf's neck grew tighter. Finally, she arrived. Everyone usually would be in bed by now, but she could tell that the lights were still on.

"That's my house! I'm home! I can't believe it!"

The great wolf lowered its head once more to stand Elise on the ground, and then quietly backed away. The girl's voice caused the front door to burst open. It was her father; judging from his unchanged clothes and the burnt torch in his hands, he must have just returned from searching for her. After her father came her mother, and even her hobbling grandmother ran out of the house at a terrific speed.

"Oh, Elise!"

"Thank the gods! Oh, thank you so much!"

"Elise, sweetheart! Are you okay?! Is it really you?!"

Scooped up in her parents' arms, Elise turned to show them the big wolf that had brought her home. Yet when she turned around, all she saw was a faint afterglow of gold evaporating into the night.

[Tips] There are many wolves in the Trialist Empire's expansive territory; most have gray or black fur.

"Ah, you ran into the Schutzwolfe."

"Schutzwolfe?"

After days of lecturing from her parents and the local townspeople that had helped search for her, Elise finally found a chance to tell her grandmother what had happened. Even now, she couldn't help but wonder what that majestic wolf had been.

He was so big that the other wolves looked like puppies in comparison, and he looked positively divine. Elise had never heard of a wolf like that, but she thought that maybe her grandmother did. After all, her grandmother knew all sorts of things—and as it turned out, this was no exception.

"That's right. He's an old alf; he may have many names, but that's

the one we know him by. Stories about him have been passed down around here for generations. He's a kind fairy that helps lost children, travelers, and adventurers; all of us have cause to be grateful for him, one way or another."

"He's an alf? But I thought he was a wolf."

"He's an alf, all right. The other alfar are the ones that bring him to us. I remember he saved your old grandfather—bless his heart—when he was just four years old. Back then, I remember he told me that the wolf came with a cute little girl as dark as the night. I bet the fairies called for him to save you because you're a good girl, sweetheart." The woman ran a gentle hand through her granddaughter's wheat-blond hair.

"*Schutzwolfe*..." Elise thought back on her savior. "He was really really big, and glowed like the moon."

"Is that so? You know, now that he's saved you, it won't do unless we pay our respects. Let's find some ice candy to offer him at the festival this fall."

"Ice candy?"

"That's right. The *Schutzwolfe* loves ice candy."

"But he's a wolf," the girl said, perplexed.

"Well," her grandmother said through chuckles, "maybe he likes sweets."

"That's weird."

Despite thinking that it was very strange for a wolf to eat candy, little Elise swore that she would save up her allowance to buy ice candy to bring into the woods.

[Tips] The *Schutzwolfe*, aka the Moonlit Wolf, is a widely known folktale in the western reach of the empire. As of late, investigators in the field have confirmed its basis in actual alfish influence in the region. Usually appearing in forests bordering rural cantons, it is most famous for delivering lost travelers to homes and familiar paths. Legend has it that its fur glows with all the beauty of the Night Goddess's physical form, and there was once a period where swaths of adventurers rushed into the forests of Rhine in search of its pelt. However, none of them have ever returned, and nowadays there are none who dare to hunt the golden beast.

The hill was peculiar. Its gentle slope gave full view of the sun and moon as their lights converged on the horizon. Even more strangely, both celestial bodies refused to set no matter how long I stared, blanketing the world in an infinite twilight. Bathed in the gentle hue of everlasting uncertainty, I took my usual seat at the base

of a gargantuan tree. And, as always, I began to groom myself.

Now then, where had my life gone so wrong?

The first mistake had to have been that I'd let my pragmatic greed drive me to choose these eyes over those lips. The second was probably when I'd accepted that pitiful girl's will and it backfired in my face. These two incidents combined had given me far too much from the alfar, and I'd turned out like this before I could notice.

I am the fey wolf dancing on this twilight hill.

The mensch boy born to some canton or another was gone. All that remained was *me*, and I was unaware of how many years it had been since I'd become an alf.

I hadn't been able to understand this as a mensch, but the alfish way of life is, incredibly, *more* obnoxious than I'd imagined. Unable to resist the impulses carved into my soul, I'd become an entity that acted without thought.

Perhaps that was why I couldn't resist saving helpless children in the forest. My brethren constantly scolded me for doing too much as they danced the eons away, but I couldn't help myself. Whether it was a wayward little adventure, a berry hunt gone wrong, or a cruel parent leaving their child to wander for all of time, I couldn't bring myself to abandon them.

A lingering fragment of a forgotten dream caused me to lend a hand to adventurers too. The great alfar lectured me all the time, and I had every intention to change, but...I just couldn't.

"What's clouding your mind?"

As I blankly stared at my dancing compatriots on the hill, Ursula jumped onto my belly. Even as I watched one of the major architects of this fate merrily nuzzle my fur, no emotion welled up. When I'd first woken up like this, I'd chased her around a fair bit, but at this point I realized that my own idiocy was a serious contributing factor. Thinking back, those days felt like a distant memory.

"Nothing," I replied. "I was reminiscing."

"Truly? Was your past really something worth recalling so fondly? I'd say that you're quite well suited to this form."

I bet I am. After all, I'd been this way for centuries.

In the time since I turned into an alf, the Trialist Empire had not changed much. A handful of wars and internal conflicts shook the nation, but it overcame its challenges to remain a major player on the world stage as it expanded its borders. The affairs of mortals went on and on, but rarely shifted meaningfully. Now and again I would spot an unfamiliar farm tool or a newly constructed spell, but people are ever people—for better or for worse.

Left behind by their unchanging ways, I shed the shell of a mensch boy to simply become *me*. I could no longer wrap my mind

around the humanity needed to feel sad about this. Even when my thoughts wandered to my father, mother, or childhood friend, all I could feel was a passing loneliness.

At this point, I could no longer recall their names. All that remained were the colors of their hair, gentle voices, and warm hands. The only relic was the pink charm that dangled from my ear.

Can you blame me? I couldn't even remember who *I* had been.

I huffed to clear my head of desolate notions when a breeze rolled across the twilight hill and caused my earring to jingle.

"Oh dear," Ursula said, "it looks like she's back again."

My memento only rang when a certain visitor approached. She was someone that had most likely been very dear to me, and she always appeared with the same lunar glow that I did. Every time, she would come to try and peel *me* away from me, wielding a terrifying sword to boot—a dreadful blade that was as nostalgic as it was horrific.

Having done my work for the day, I did not want to see her. Part of it was the fact that I feared her skill, but the chief reason was that her gaze made my heart stir. Whenever we locked eyes, an awful fear would wash over me; an insatiable urge to rip anything silver, green, or blue to shreds washed over me.

Wait, haven't I already done that? Or did I fail to? No, did I?

No amount of thought could give me an answer, so I chose to run away from my nostalgic visitor.

"Schutzwolfe" is an elf that saves people. My feet leap through space and time to bring me to those who have lost their way home. And tonight, these legs took me to trample over a wandering soul's despair.

"Whoa?! Wh-What the—a monster?! Why'd I even come to another world if I'm just gonna run into monsters all day?!"

I danced out into the pleasant moonlight of an unknown forest. The man I came across wore a full set of black clothing that, curiously, tickled at a lost sense of homesickness.

[Tips] He who has lost his name and place still exists to serve his purpose. The intent behind the bodhisattva's choice will remain firm no matter how severely he changes.

Few as they may be, there are those who strike others with fear by virtue of existing. Royalty demand submission by their presence alone; the most infamous knights prevent crime by merely strolling around on their steeds.

Similarly, there are those who command so much power that facing them is enough to know that victory against them is impossible.

One such specimen stood in a sea of blood.

A mountain of corpses lay in the wake of the single blade that had cut them down, and the pitiful survivors fruitlessly clutched at arms, legs, and the precious innards that spilled from their wounds.

The lone swordswoman continued to paint the scene red. Despite sailing in an ocean of crimson, not a single drop had landed on her person. It was as if she was herself a blade: tall and slim, her well-trained body had no weakness. Although she was on the thinner side, there was no hint of fragility to be seen in her.

Her leather armor was far past broken in, and the visible patches of repair betrayed a long history of battle. Her countless scars were far from ugly; the proof of her experience was beautiful to the point of horror.

What drew the most attention, however, was her arming sword. The pattern-welded design was antique; the handle and guard had gone through generations of replacements, but the blade itself had swung true for ages. One look was enough to know it was no decoration.

“Eep! Augh, ahh...” Tens of seconds were enough to reduce a person to lifeless flesh, but one fortunate soul had been outside the warrior’s reach. With legs too weak to stand, he writhed around in the dirt.

The man knew—he *knew* this swordswoman standing in the sea of chaos. In these parts, she was the strongest there was.

Ye who doth wrong others, live in fear. The day ever comes when thine debts art collected. So spoke the poets when they honored the long-told saga of this monster.

A gust of wind carried the smell of death as it blew open the hood of her overcoat. Her hair fluttered and a polarizing sweetness drifted on the breeze. Golden locks flowed around the permanent wrinkle in her brow and tapered off past her amber eyes. Her stunning looks had long been locked into a solemn grimace. Should she ever smile, the whole world would move to protect her; yet none had ever seen the frown leave her face.

The warrior’s name was Elisa. Although she introduced herself as Elisa of Konigstuhl, the adventurer was better known by other names: the Final Judge, Bandit Killer, Guardian of Babes, the Blademaster, Princess of the Red Sea, and—most famous of all—*Elisa, the Alfslayer*.

The men who’d been hiding away in the brush to attack a passing caravan cried at their misfortune. They had heard the tales, and the Elisa of sagas knew no mercy. When she passed judgment on thieves, her sentence was always absolute. Every efficient swing of her sword lopped off another head.

One of the survivors abandoned his weapon and knelt down,

begging for forgiveness. Another turned and ran as fast as he could. Another still played to her sympathy and swore to never harm anyone again.

Alas, none would live to see the next dawn.

[Tips] Elisa the Alfslayer is a changeling adventurer-cum-magus famous in the remote parts of the empire. Known especially for saving cantons plagued by mischievous fairies, she is honored for her centuries of work and unsparing attitude against those who do wrong.

The oral tradition's account of the wandering Alfslayer is at times a rural parent's only hope to see their child return after being spirited away.

Golden light tore through the woods like a violent tempest. Clad in moonlit fur, the massive wolf swam through the gaps in the trees. Despite his canine features, it was clear at a glance that the beast was in distress as he sprinted at top speed—fast enough to leave even the best warhorse in the dust.

“Hey?! Whoa?! Listen to me!” However, while his speed was impressive, the man on his back could scarcely hold on. It went without saying that the wolf wore no saddle, and the man struggled to find anything to grip.

“Shut up or you’ll bite your tongue!” In spite of his dog-mouth, Schutzwolfe deftly roared away his partner’s worries as he told him to can it. Perhaps the wolf had gotten careless. After bumping into this man who reminded him of home, he’d followed him around for a time.

According to the man, he had come from a different world, and had become an adventurer on his quest to find a way home. Schutzwolfe had established a contract of partnership with him on a whim, and the two had gone on a handful of adventures together.

Truthfully, the beast of legend thought that the man’s only saving grace was his unfettered sincerity. Even after weathering the dangers of battle, his pitiful endurance showed no signs of improving, and seeing others take advantage of his bleeding heart wherever they went was downright painful. Still, the man was strong of will when it mattered most, and Schutzwolfe’s urge to protect meant he couldn’t bring himself to leave him be.

Following the man around for some time, he’d grown complacent...until his lifelong foe finally caught up to them.

“Why, hng, are we running?! She looked, ugh, like a normal adventurer!”

“Just shut up for a second! I need to focus!”

“Can you at least tell me *why* we’re—whoa?!”

With how fast the branches were whizzing by, the trees might as well have been punching at them, and it took everything the man had to dodge. Usually, his partner ran at a more manageable speed; tonight, consideration had been thrown out the window, and he had no idea why.

He would soon find out. Up ahead, *dozens* of trees all fell at once, cutting off their path—and then they fell on top of them.

“Tsk, she always *has* to make a mess!”

“What?! What just happened?!”

The massive wolf dexterously avoided the falling timber with a perfectly rhythmic turn to mitigate any loss of speed. Dodging the trees, he prepared to leap back onto the path from which they came—but his opponent would not let that opening go easily.

A shadow danced in the canopy; suddenly, it leaped down. Her blade held high, ready to commit to a strike with the full force of her fall, the warrior dropped on them. Based on their positions and trajectories, the wolf would not be able to dodge.

Schutzwolfe quickly cast a defensive spell, seven layers deep. With each layer capable of stopping siege cannons, using this many for a sword was an embarrassing level of overkill. At least, it *would have been* against anyone else wielding any other blade.

The shrill sound of shattering glass accompanied the destruction of all seven of the wolf’s barriers. Although she was on the taller end, the warrior was still a mere mensch. The comparably tiny attacker had sliced through his defenses like butter.



Her weapon was no ordinary blade. What once had been nothing more than a well-built sword had morphed over its long history of culling immortal concepts. Enchanted by the tale of its travels, the sword was now a mystic blade, peerless in its niche. Known in lore as *Dreambreaker*, the woman's blade existed to destroy magic. Its effect on the elf's spell was immediately apparent.

Naturally, the atypical sword belonged to an atypical wielder. The absurdity of felling dozens of trees with a single strike needs no explanation, and the physique required to hop to another tree before they collapsed is inexplicable.

"Hrgh..." Schutzwolfe had succeeded in dulling the impact of her strike, and the warrior's fatal blow had been reduced to a light graze. Injured as he was, the wolf was far from death and instantly took off again at full speed.

The woman landed and swung again at the fleeing beast without hesitation. Her attack just barely missed, but the blademaster showed no sign of anger or panic as she gave chase.

The game of tag between beast and mensch continued for what felt like an eternity. The rally of slashes and spells tore down tree after tree, but neither could be bothered to care about the critters that called this forest home.

Still, the two combatants remained perpetually calm. Every attack so far had been a feint to search for a better opportunity to strike. The two masters clashed in an arena of the mind, carefully watching to find their chance for a fatal—or at least, debilitating—blow.

Yet as skilled as they were...there was one other present on the scene.

"Oh." Three asinine voices rang out in unison.

The great wolf's partner in crime had lost his grip at the worst possible time. Fur slipped through the man's fingers and he flew off...just as Schutzwolfe had leapt over a gorge.

Already soaring at top speed, Schutzwolfe would not make it in time to save his partner. All he could do was curse his inability to turn on a dime and watch the man fall.

Meanwhile, the swordswoman who had caused this whole situation hesitated for but a moment...

[Tips] Dreambreaker is the famous blade carried by a folk hero. After cutting down an immeasurable number of monsters and fairies of all kinds, the sword itself came to be infused with magical power.

The visitor from another world had recently gained some

semblance of notoriety in this region. Known by some as the Wolf Tamer and the Do-Gooder by others, he now asked himself the same question for the umpteenth time today: *How did it end up like this?*

He was sitting next to a river in a ravine, and he knew very well why he was still breathing at all. The blonde swordswoman drying her clothes by their makeshift bonfire had saved him.

He was happy that she'd managed to keep him alive. The fact that she'd held him by the back and legs (something he knew as a "princess carry") hurt his pride a bit, but that was fine too. He wasn't exactly *excited* that she'd missed the landing and caused the two of them to fall all the way down the canyon into the river below, but he wasn't upset either—everyone makes mistakes.

What absolutely boggled his mind was the fact that the woman who'd saved his life then immediately turned around and asked him for help by telling him that she was so bad at starting fires that she might *die*.

In the end, the man hurried to make a bonfire so the two of them could dry off their clothes. Thankfully, it was still summer and they had little risk of freezing to death, but the mountains were unbearably cold at night.

What followed was a flood of complaints that showed that the warrior had exactly zero ability to care for herself. She was thirsty, she was hungry, she couldn't take off her armor... It was as if the woman had grown up a sheltered noble with no concept of doing her own tasks. Still, the man owed her his life, so he dutifully worked to repay her.

After finally managing to finish up everything he needed to do...the total silence began to unsettle him.

"Um..."

"Yes?"

As he watched the woman sip on a cup of red tea he'd pulled out of his knapsack, he finally reached his limit and raised his voice. She responded without bothering to look up. Although she was the most beautiful person he'd ever laid eyes on, her toddler-like attitude left him at a loss for how to proceed.

When he asked for her name, she curtly said, "Elisa." Afterward, he continued to slowly build something akin to a conversation. Once introductions were out of the way, he managed to learn that she was an adventurer, just like him—except for the fact that she was *far* more experienced. Learning this, the man's doubts could no longer be held back.

"Why is a splendid adventurer like you hunting Schutzwolfe?"

Elisa fell silent and looked as though she were contemplating something. She was probably wondering whether she ought to tell him

or not. After a moment, she abruptly began to tell her story, as interspersed with awkward pauses as it was.

Hers was the tale of a brother named Erich and a sister named Elisa. The brother pushed himself so far to win a good life for his sister that he lost his place as a mensch. He fell into the alfar's trap: they wanted to whisk him away to their twilight hill to keep him forever.

By the time the weak sister had grown up to be a full-fledged magus, it was too late. She had spent day in and day out trying to anchor her brother's muddled psyche in place, using everything and everyone at her disposal, but she failed.

At long last, the brother truly became an alf and vanished, abandoning those who loved him: his family, his friends, and the sister he'd sworn to protect.

"I've been chasing him all this time to win back my brother," Elisa concluded.

"And that's...my partner."

"Exactly."

Long after the brother had lost himself in fey life, the sister continued to give chase. She swore to one day tear off the bewitching pelt that bound him. When she did, they would live happily together again.

Though everyone they knew had long since been washed away by the torrent of time, the changeling Elisa remained. She continued to roam the land, chasing rumors of fairy activity. At times she saved children that had been spirited away, and at others, she slayed alfar troublemakers.

On finishing her long monologue full of stops and stutters, Elisa had fallen asleep with her cup still in hand. The man looked at her and realized that he was just as tired. All the drama of the day had left him unable to keep up, and he felt like his brain was about to overheat.

Just as he began to nod off, he suddenly jolted himself awake...only to find himself somewhere completely different: he was on his trusty partner's back.

"Good morning," Schutzwolfe said.

"Huh? Wait, what?! What happened?!"

"Calm down. I asked a fairy to put you two to sleep. Just so you know, she had a strong anti-alf incense on her, so it was really hard to come get you, and she's too clever to put to sleep all at once. We had to slowly ramp up the spell for it to work."

"That's not the problem!" Seeing his partner speak so matter-of-factly, the man raised his voice. He went on to ask, "Is this all right with you? Your sister's been searching for you this whole time—are

you really okay with running? Don't you want to go back?"

"Who knows."

For what may have been the first time since they'd met, Schutzwolfe did not answer in certain terms. He made it clear that their conversation was over.

Perhaps there was some sort of nuance that only an elf could understand. The man unsuccessfully attempted to sympathize with the immortality of fey life, and had no choice but to bite his tongue. Yet in his heart, he swore an oath: *One day, I'll lead these two to a happy ending.*

[Tips] At times, mortals metamorphose into inhuman entities. The vast majority of these cases are irreversible.



Afterword

First and foremost, I'd like to dedicate this novel to my beloved grandmother, who has supported me in everything I've done. Now free from most of your responsibilities, I'd love for you to make the most of your free time. Perhaps you might consider traveling the world.

Next, the utmost thanks to the companies that produce TRPGs for me to play. Corona aside, I've been so busy that I haven't had a chance to sit down at a tabletop as of late, but I always look through new rulebooks and supplements and think to myself, "I may live in a world like ours, but maybe it's worth seeing tomorrow." Your contributions are the reason I can enjoy drawing breath.

Of course, I applaud Lansane for the beautiful masterpieces that elevate my meager ramblings into something beautiful. The blend of fairy-like charm and inherent terror that I attempted to convey is given life through your renditions. Ursula and Lottie have the perfect touch of dubious endearment. And I struggle to find the words to express how immaculately Helga is portrayed.

Once again, I must apologize to my wonderful editor, who patiently worked with me through my delays. I would never think that your presence prevents me from mumbling to myself. And I certainly didn't break out into a cold sweat when you overheard me and said, "I don't need your finger. I need your *manuscript*."

Finally, let me offer a heartfelt thank you to all the dedicated readers who picked up this second volume. The reason I'm able to write this afterword addressing you all is because you continued to water me.

Now, setting the curiously Western style of gratitude aside, I have thankfully been able to publish a second volume in this series. Thank you very much to all those that have braved the pandemic to get your hands on the first volume to begin reading this story.

Since I have so graciously been allotted five whole pages of afterword space this time, I would like to touch on this work and the process of converting my previous writings into a proper novel. It goes without saying that this book is a touched-up version of the web novel I uploaded to Narou. However, the contents are drastically different—not in terms of overarching story, of course, but I added several events while making sure not to cause any contradictions in the plot.

Essentially, readers of the web novel may find that story beats occur in different ways or see skills acquired in a new order; these are the sorts of tweaks that I've made. Thus, anyone interested in following the online version should have no problem jumping right in from here.

Still, the variance in how characters are introduced or deliver lines may cause you to have distinct impressions of them between the two works. That may be a minor point of interest. From the cast introduced so far, I would say Agrippina is remarkably different. After all, neither Elisa's kidnapping nor Helga's arc were present in the original version.

What this means is that after all my joking around about Old Man Henderson, maybe this is the version that's bumped up on his scale. Or maybe this book is a supplement?

Ah, and if I may clear my name on one point: I know that I added several tens of thousands of Japanese characters' worth of content only for the first two volumes to each be around the length of a normal book, but I didn't do this on purpose.

Every now and again, someone will ask me if I purposefully left a gap in the story for me to fill with a paperback book. This is not the case—I merely twisted and turned the extra events until I could wedge them in. Being based on TRPGs, Erich's campaign is conveniently compartmentalized into sessions, making it easier for me to manipulate the story in ways to fit new ideas. Here we see yet another reason why tabletop games are beautiful.

This follows the same principle as tossing in a one-shot session in the middle of a long campaign with the goal of giving your players a little extra experience. I'm sure you know how some tabletop games come with ready-made scenarios that you and your friends can hop into at a moment's notice, right? The Gospel of Mr. Henderson is following in the footsteps of this time-honored tradition of having free experience lying around for the taking.

Although, in truth, I'm already sweating trying to think of a spot where I could add content to volume three—if there is a volume three. With all that I've done to the first two volumes, the idea of not doing so for the third would be, well... I'm sure you understand.

I suppose I should put my undirected persuasion check to rest. Moving along, this series is based on TRPGs and is a mishmash of all of the things this humble author enjoys. Among the many story elements I incorporated, the primary setting was influenced by the historical period that most caught my attention in my years at school: the early to High Middle Ages of both western and eastern Europe.

With how little remains from that time, the period following the end of Pax Romana saw some empires crumble, while others remained

firm. From there, new powerhouses rose to the world stage with revolutionary ideas on the systems of power and servitude. It is a fascinating era to study.

Frankly, I'm not a fan of the term "Dark Ages." The lack of surviving documentation may mean we know little about what happened, but the moniker paints an image of an evil tyrant bringing humanity to its knees.

Regardless, I took elements from the novels and films I enjoyed in my childhood, mixed them with the form of recreation that took the better part of my youth—at the expense of nearly everything else—and tossed it all into the backdrop of my favorite period in history. That is the essence of what this story is.

Adventure, monsters, and inhuman people with cultures all their own—their fantastical nature is exactly what sets my heart ablaze. Imagining these sorts of worlds was so much fun that I had to write down my own. I owe everything I've made to those who built up universes that enticed me, begging me to jump in as a PC.

I suppose there isn't much else I can touch on without spoiling this work in its entirety. I am wearily writing this in the dead of night, so my thoughts are a bit jumbled, but let me make it clear that this is the result of overwork.

There is one thing that I must not forget to touch on. The Light Novel News Online Awards released their April total rankings, rankings for new titles, and the *Everyone's Favorite LN of 2020* list, where an inordinate amount of support placed the first volume at seventh. Thank you so very much. Seeing this much passion for my work fills me with a warm, happy, yet itchy feeling inside that I struggle to put to words.

Whether it be Lansane or my editor, the people I'm indebted to only seem to increase. At this rate, I'll have to take out a mortgage.

With that said, I will do all that I can to live up to your expectations and put out a third volume. Should we meet again, it will be in the imperial capital; our first look into urban life will come with the secrets hidden in the depths of magic and the college which studies it.

Those we meet along the way all have rather notable quirks, and I already can't wait to see how they'll look in Lansane's wonderful illustrations. I know *that* character is painted to be a terribly sorry person, but I happen to be quite a fan of the figure in question.

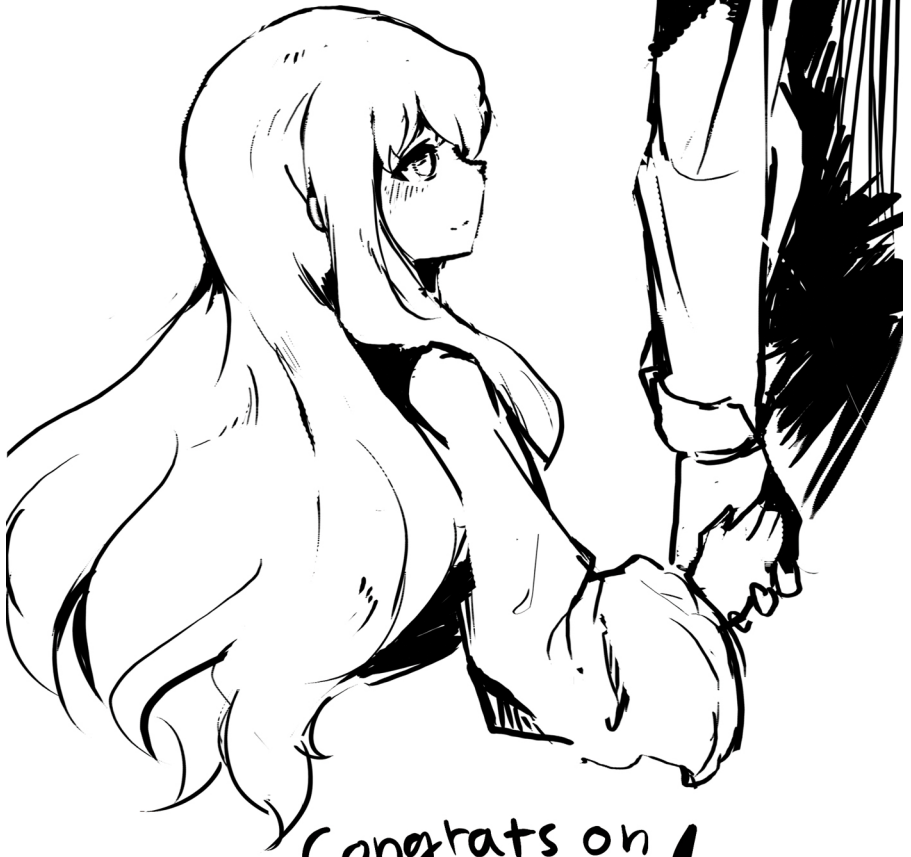
I sincerely hope that I will be blessed with the good fortune to introduce you all to him or her—whoever it may be—as I move to conclude this afterword.

You, my beloved reader who has read not only the novel but the afterword that follows, have earned yourself experience for

completing the second session. Please pull out your character sheet. Thinking on how one might change in preparation for the next round of play is another element of tabletop gaming.

I forever bear my love for that filthy room of yesteryear; so too do I love the clean studio that I have long abandoned due to the virus. However, my heart is always there, and will be there as I pray to meet you again in volume three. If we do, let us scribble away with pen and paper, rolling away without a care in the world.

Young Helga
(my imagination)



Congrats on
Volume two!

anSane

The background of the cover is a full-page illustration. It depicts a large, pale-skinned figure with long, flowing white hair and red eyes, wearing a dark, form-fitting dress. This figure is embracing a smaller, blonde-haired girl with pink eyes and a surprised expression. The girl is wearing a green and yellow dress. They are set against a backdrop of a large, bright yellow moon in a purple and blue sky with soft clouds. The overall style is anime-inspired.

Author
Schuld
Illustrator
Lansane

Min-Maxing
My TRPG
Build in
Another
World

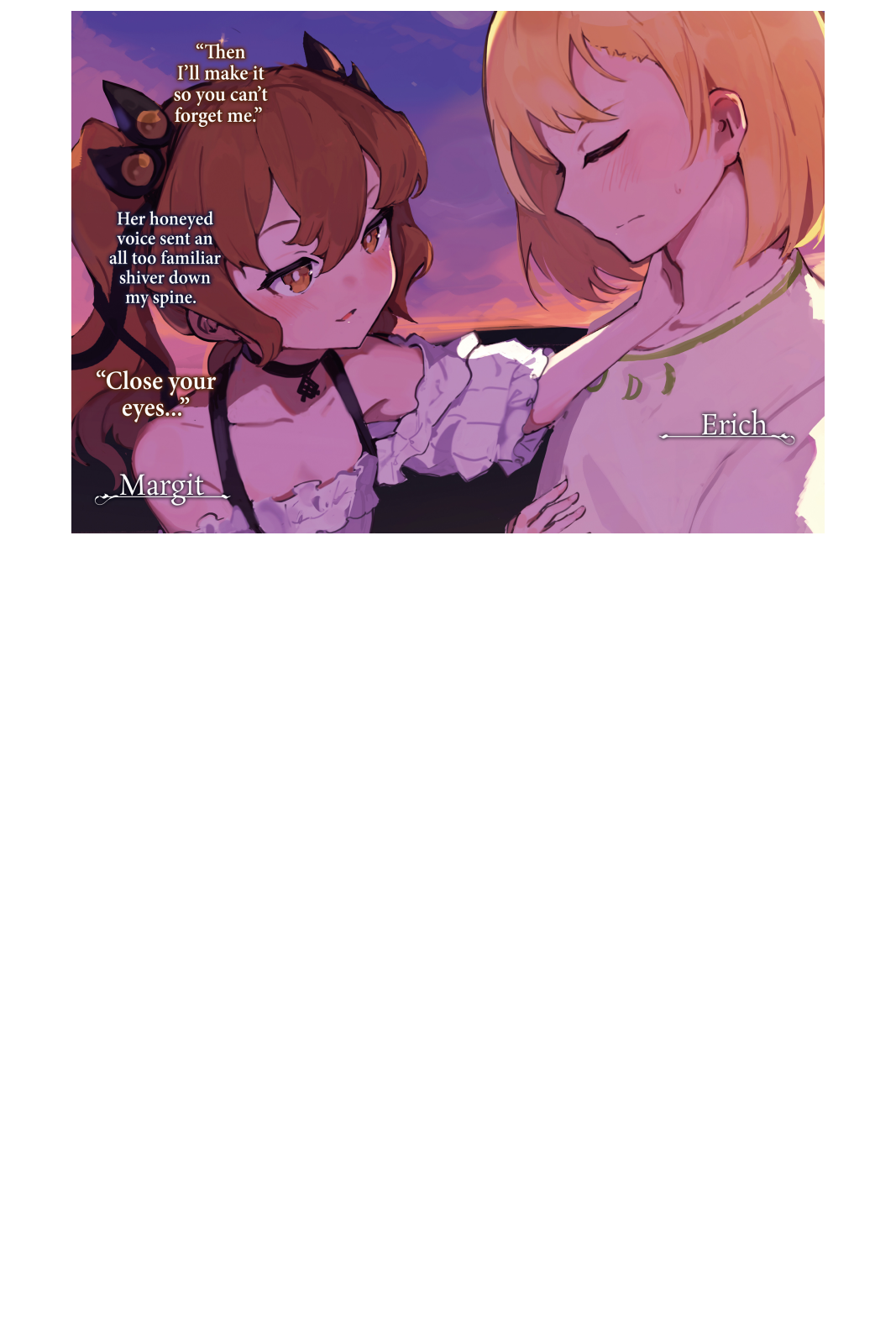
Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

2

Henderson Scale

The “Henderson” referenced in the subtitle is Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop legend.

Famed for overcoming a blood-thirsty GM to miraculously tie up the story he appears in, he has since become a measuring stick for how derailed a campaign can get.



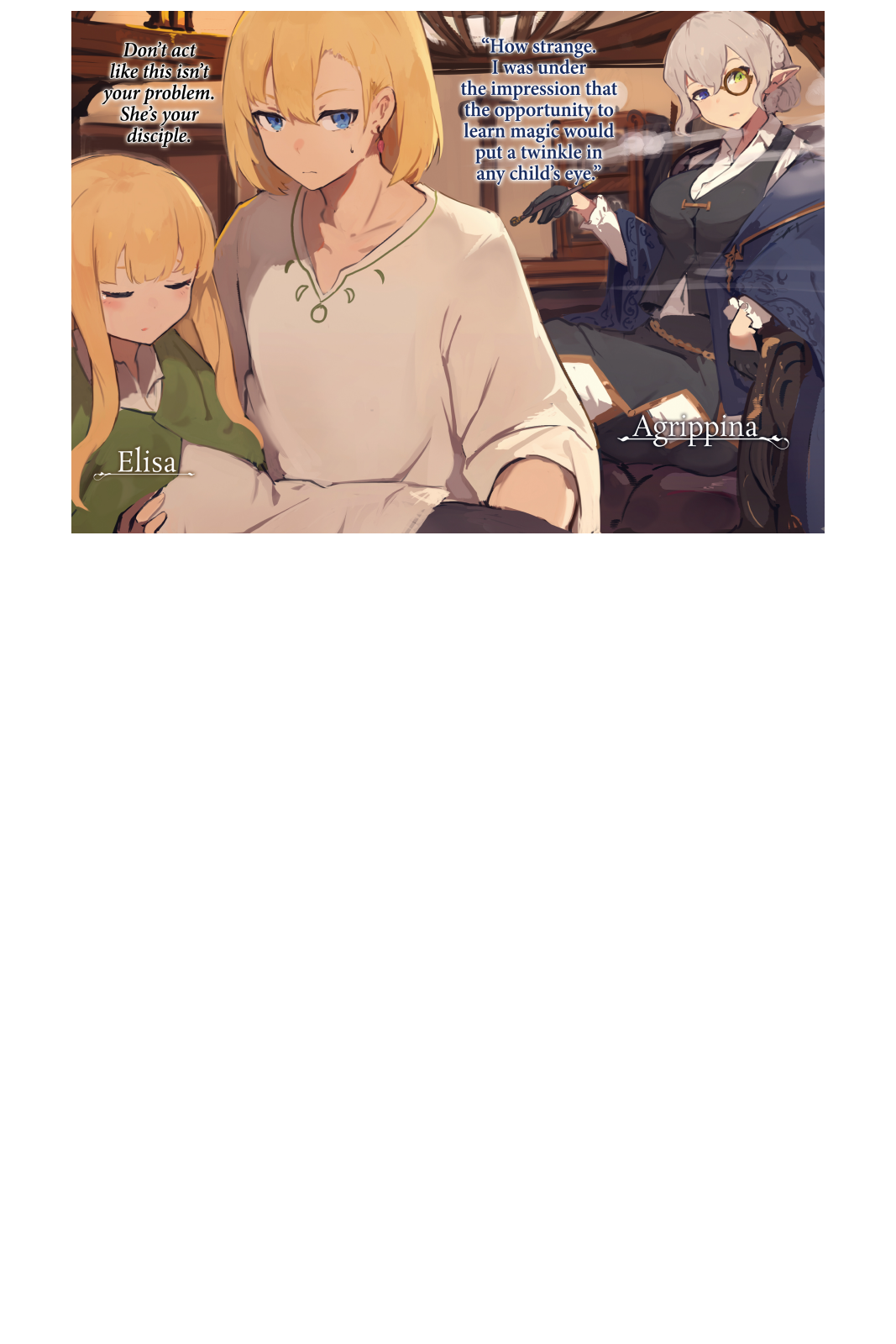
“Then
I’ll make it
so you can’t
forget me.”

Her honeyed
voice sent an
all too familiar
shiver down
my spine.

“Close your
eyes...”

—Margit—

—Erich—



*Don't act
like this isn't
your problem.
She's your
disciple.*

Elisa

*"How strange.
I was under
the impression that
the opportunity to
learn magic would
put a twinkle in
any child's eye."*

Agrippina



The scene
that awaited
us was far
worse than I'd
imagined.

“Is she...”

“Alas, she is.
Here is the
other sister
I would like
you to save.”

CHARACTER

Name

Helga

Race

Changeling(?)

Classification

Enemy

Specialties

Mana Output VII

Skills

- ◆ Advanced Etiquette
- ◆ Fey Magic

Traits

- ◆ Broken Blessing
- ◆ Shattered Body



CHARACTER

Name

Lottie

Race

Sylphid

Classification

Connection/Enemy

Specialties

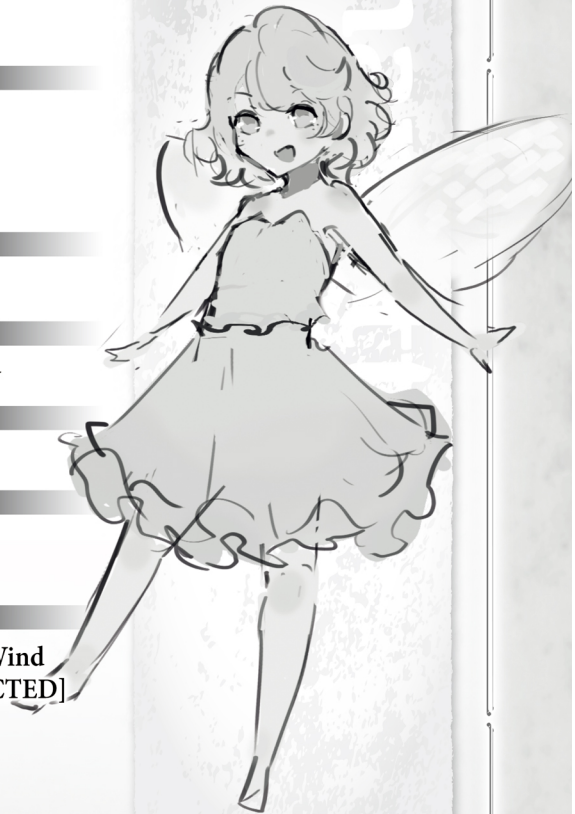
[REDACTED]

Skills

- ◆ Fey Magic
- ◆ Windspeak

Traits

- ◆ Blessing of the Wind
- ◆ Queen's [REDACTED]
- ◆ [REDACTED]



Bonus Short Stories

The Aim of Effort

As the sound of footsteps caught the methuselah's ear, Agrippina closed her book and turned to watch her servant diligently toil away. Her mind spun: he was an average mensch, like those she could find littered across the world over. Her disinterest in names had made it a struggle to drag "Erich" out of the recesses of her mind at first, yet the process had grown easier with time. He was also rather handsome, probably—truth be told, her capacity to evaluate such things had long decayed to the point that the best she could manage was an educated guess.

Furthermore, Erich was quite the student of magic, as far as mensch went. All Agrippina had to do was toss him a textbook, and voilà, he'd learned all the necessary household spells to busy himself day in and day out.

The boy rose early to prepare breakfast and clean the room of dust (though the magus saw no need for the latter). What was more, he even cared for the carriage's steeds; Agrippina had left their welfare to the people of the caravan and only tended to them with magic when she absolutely had to. For a normal person, he was an employee worthy of praise.

However, the methuselah's opinion was slightly skewed from normalcy. *What a hurried creature*, she thought. This was an impression many methuselah had of mensch; simply put, the sight of an intelligent being rushing through their days as if some invisible threat were nipping at their heels was incomprehensible to an immortal.

In fairness, there was little Agrippina and her kind could do to change that. Neither hunger nor thirst hounded them, pushing meals into the realm of luxury—for those that weren't particularly fond of the pleasure, it was reduced further to a social lubricant. These perfect specimens were on a different plane of reality from the poor mensch who required frequent sustenance and reproduction to prevent their people from collapsing.

The inverse was just as true: no mortal being could possibly wrap their mind around Agrippina's lifestyle. She ate when she was invited to eat, and *only* when she was invited to eat. While she understood the pleasures of taste—indeed, she had savored the delight of fine cuisine

many a time in the past—it bored her, and she would never choose to spend her precious time eating.

Cleaning was a similar story. Methuselah had such efficient bodies that they expelled no waste. Her clothes could be freshened up with a quick spell, and her rooms never got particularly dirty.

Sleep was the sole mortal pastime she indulged in, and even then, it was only to organize her thoughts and memories. However, this singular commonality was far from enough to make her ludicrous way of life familiar to an average mensch.

Agrippina cared so little for “proper” life because there was no threat of death to loom over her. For a woman that so dearly loved books and the stories they told, the chores of reality were of little concern...that is, until her life with these two children began.

“Erich.”

“Did you call for me, madam?”

“Indeed I did. Fetch me some tea, would you?”

Agrippina had recently begun to allocate attention to the food and drink she had neglected for so long. She didn’t particularly *want* to drink tea, per se, but by asking for a cup, she reminded herself of the flow of time and how imperative it was for her charges to eat regular meals.

That’s right: as inconvenient and downright illogical as she found it to be, mensch had to eat *every* day or risk starving. To make matters worse, they grew less efficient if they didn’t eat a whopping three meals per day, according to a child-rearing book in her collection. Had she not read this manual, this basic fact would have completely slipped past her, and keeping this in mind was imperative for a pleasant journey home.

Honestly, what an ordeal—for both me and them.

The book had gone on to state that these little creatures would live no more than a century; when the methuselah dove into her massive pool of memories, she recalled that the faces greeting her upon returning to the Stahl estate as a child would change with every journey. This had been especially true of her mensch acquaintances.

Fifteen years was enough for adulthood; by twenty, they bore children; and by forty, the things were already beginning to die. These fleeting souls could come and go in the time a methuselah finished their childhood. And there, perhaps, lay the reason why this boy hurried around the carriage as he did.

“Your tea is served, madam.”

“Mm, very good.”

A short tangent on a single strand of Agrippina’s consciousness was all it took for her beverage to be prepared. Where once her china had collected dust, it had now been cleaned and shined so perfectly

that she couldn't even spot a fingerprint on it. As for the tea itself, it wasn't quite as enjoyable as what she'd find at a proper salon with well-trained stewards, but it was worthy of a passing mark.

With a quick sip, the strong and unembellished flavor of red tea slipped down Agrippina's throat. *Ah, yes. I remember now. This is what it feels like to "drink."* Since she was already wasting time, she figured that she might as well enjoy herself. Her initial reason for stopping by so many inns was simply to experience their luxury—however, she found no reason why she couldn't add extravagant food to the mix.

The magus made certain to tell the boy to order the finest breakfast, lunch, and dinner from every lodging, and to prepare them himself when they were on the road. This way, even if she happened to forget, her servant would sort it out for her. As eccentric as she was, Agrippina cared for the children in her own way. Her way was unapologetically methuselah in standard, though, and the brother and sister could not understand her efforts.

On the topic of food, she recalled that her servant had gone wide-eyed when she'd easily spend *librae* to purchase meals. The fiscal sense of commoners remained a point of peculiarity to the high-born woman, but she did remember seeing the people of her caravan react similarly when she'd tossed around silver pieces as rewards for errands. Surely, Erich must have thought her quite the lavish spender.

Living alongside an alien race was just plain difficult for the methuselah. That being said, she had no interest in getting the children to understand her, let alone providing them an inroad to do so.

Agrippina spent a moment enjoying her fragrant tea before retreating to one of her few true addictions: the pipe. She lit with it magic, then let the smoke of mystic herbs flood her lungs and drowned herself in indescribable bliss, quieting her active mind.

Suddenly, she noted that the smoke she was exhaling was rather troublesome. The tobacco she smoked had been steeped in an arcane concoction powerful enough to intoxicate a methuselah; naturally, it would have a pronounced effect on lesser beings. Not to say that a single whiff would blow a *mensh's* mind into the stratosphere, but a drag of the pipe would most definitely be enough to rob one's consciousness.

The magus silently knit together a spell to filter the cloud leaving her lips and keep it from wafting out into the room around her. Agrippina could have erased it entirely, of course, but a pipe that blew no smoke was no pipe at all to her.

"How troublesome..."

"Madam?"

"Don't mind me," she said with another puff. As she continued her

unnoticed act of thoughtfulness, she once more mused on how impassable the gap between peoples was.

After all, no one can ever bring themselves to abandon what values make them who they are.

[Tips] Understanding beings with vastly different physiologies and cultures is inherently a difficult endeavor.

Fey Stature

The hill was locked in eternal twilight, forever fated to straddle the line between a sun that never sank and a moon that never rose. In this fey homeland, alfar drifted to and fro without a care in the world, only acting in whatever manner caught their fancy.

However, as infinitely free as these fairies were, there remained some semblance of organization in their ranks. Only the alfar could know of this hierarchy, both because it was a secret of the highest degree and because none who stumbled upon it could ever grasp it. Making up a part of reality itself, these living phenomena required organizing principles. This role was filled by the strongest—the kings and queens.

“Waaaugh...”

Countless formless entities mingled with their less abstract counterparts and beckoned in their visitors—whether they were there of their own volition or not—as they danced without rest. Amidst the giddy laughter, a lone alf weakly floated along, looking as sad as could be.

The palm-sized personification of a gentle spring breeze drifted by, a large bead of water welling up in her pink eyes; everything about her body language wailed in melancholy. True to themselves, alfar perennially relished in their emotions: they cried like the world was ending when sad, and celebrated like they were welcoming a new brother or sister when happy. Such was the key to their fulfilling lives.

Today, the little sylphid’s grasslike hair was shriveled up. With a name and a sense of self, the wind fairy was remarkably powerful for her kind. When an alf presiding over growth, change, and weathering glided by in a mood like this, she brought a chilling breeze with her. Like a gust in early autumn, her overflowing state of mind chilled the skin of those around her. Yet she had only just been freed from her prison and had tied her fate to a cute little mensch she was fond of. What reason could there be for her sorry state?

Some of her compatriots came to speak to their long-unseen sister, but she shrugged them off with a tired wave. Finally, the sylphid landed at the base of a large tree—more precisely, she crash-landed,

her stamina depleted. Like a puppet with cut strings, she collapsed so lifelessly that she could disappear at any moment.

“My, my. It seems I’ve found myself a melting fairy.”

The wind alf heard a voice from above, but she was too haggard to look up and respond.

“Hey! Would you not ignore me like that?”

“Hrrghh... Heavy...”

The voice seemed a tad irked, and before the sylphid knew it, someone had sat on her. With her guts crushed, the tired fairy grew weaker still.

“How rude. I’ll have you know I’m as light as a feather, Lottie.”

“Ursula, you meanie! We’re *both* light like feathers!”

The girl clad in grasses was Charlotte, and the one sitting on her wearing nothing but her own hair was Ursula. This pair had known each other for a proper eternity, and the svartalf showed no signs of getting up, despite her friend’s complaints. She merely peered at her squashed companion and asked what had happened.

Lottie groaned for a while. Her voice was neither angry nor pained, but something about it seemed to amuse Ursula, so the sylphid stopped. Instead, she began to explain what had happened in her characteristic childish speech.

Cutting to the chase, Lottie had gotten chewed out. *A lot*. In fact, the lecture she’d received had been of legendary proportions.

First and foremost, the fact that she’d gotten herself into a situation where she couldn’t even return to the twilight hill—not to mention the fact that pitying a sister was not just cause to go and get oneself captured—was unacceptable. Yet what came after was even *worse*. Alfars were known to bestow gifts on those they favored—yes, that much was fine. In fact, Lottie had been allotted a fey prize to present to the pretty boy or girl she fell for, and doing so was acceptable.

However, Lottie was not meant to offer one of two choices, *and* she had bent her own rules for the sake of her own amusement. Naturally, she had been bounced around to all kinds of greater alfar, who each subjected her to an endless hell of lectures.

“How foolish,” Ursula said with a laugh. “I told you you ought to have offered an unreasonable choice like me.”

“But! What if he picked the bad one?” The sylphid knew well what the seed of change could do once grown—it could weather away at the very shape of a soul.

Ursula knew just how sensitive an alf was to the concepts over which she presided. Thinking that Lottie had a point, she considered what would have happened if the boy had chosen to take on her fey traits with a giggle.

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful in its own way?”

Possibilities were just possibilities, but the svartalf grinned thinking that this hypothetical timeline would suit her just fine. On the other hand, the flattened sylphid had just received an earful about how her overindulgence could have warped the very nature of the child she’d found, and could only groan in response.

Perhaps the night fairy’s laughter transcended the veil between dimensions; far away, a young boy was overcome with the sudden urge to sneeze.

[Tips] By the most rigorous of definitions, the twilight hill does not “exist” in the same way or on the same plane as physical reality. Those who call it their home have views unfathomable to the human mind.

A Maiden’s Resolve

“I don’t like gloomy goodbyes,” Margit had gallantly stated.

On the day of Erich’s departure, she did not go to meet him. In fact, the day before, she had put on an air of security by insisting that he spend his last moments in the canton with the family he was leaving behind.

Thus, she refused to chase after the carriage or cry out for him. It was too late to act spoiled, begging to pounce on those lovely shoulders one last time. All she did was watch from afar.

All eight of the jumping spider arachne’s petite legs worked in tandem to scale a massive tree on the edge of Kongistuhl. Whereas a mensch would struggle to climb the many branches, let alone rest their weight on them, Margit calmly perched atop her bark tower.

She squinted her eyes to dial in her impeccable vision on a lone carriage branching away from the departing caravan. The two splendid steeds in front were pulling along her lifelong companion and the sister for whose sake he’d accepted servitude. He was dedicating years of his time, deferring his dreams, all to win a normal life for the toddler.

In all honesty, Margit was jealous of Elisa. She knew they were kin—that Elisa was the one and only member of Erich’s family he was in a position to dote on—but the unfiltered love he showed for the girl was impressive. His self-sacrifice was nigh unbelievable; few would be willing to go to such lengths for *anyone*.

Margit had never before let her hideous emotion show through. Not once did she ever imply it, let alone allow it to bleed into her expression. In fact, she’d done her utmost to not pay it much mind at all. *After all*, she told herself, *Elisa is just his sister*.

However, seeing Erich leave for a life far, far away stoked the flame of her apocalyptic envy. How could it not? He was leaving to devote his life to earning a sum that could very well take lifetimes to accrue; it would be stranger not to covet a love so true.

Margit did not doubt him: had she been the one to find herself on the brink of catastrophe, Erich surely would have done the same for her. This was no youthful flight of fancy—the unwavering flames of faith burned within the maiden’s heart.

Yet a maiden as she was, the thought would not leave her side:
How, oh how, could you love another as you do me?

Truth be told, Margit was prepared to welcome him back even if he played around on his journey—at worst, even if he returned with a child or two. Although she could not wrap her mind around the charms of any other prey, her mother had told her that mensch men were “just made that way,” and the young arachne felt as though she could be understanding.

But that did not extend to seeing him so passionately *love* someone else. An indescribable emotion beyond simple possessiveness swirled within her. Perhaps if one were to accept that mensch were made with flawed fidelity, then one could argue that the childishly violent emotion welling up now was just a part of how arachne were made—a truism that held for the web-weavers, night-stalkers, and brute-forcers of their kind alike.

The vivid flavor of iron that had graced Margit’s tongue on that twilight hill leapt through time to assault her taste buds. As the carriage slowly rolled out of view, she held her skittish legs in place by sheer force of will. Seeing him off like this was already in bad taste; she had to fight the urge to keep him in view. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from leaping onto the departing buggy.

Oh, Margit thought with a bitter smile, it turns out I’m just like every other girl.

Holding back her upturned lips, she tugged at her hair and reset herself. She turned away. Just as Erich had chosen to uphold his will, she too had something that needed to be done: where his mission was to protect Elisa, Margit’s was to continue her life in the canton.

The arachne swore to steal every trick in her mother’s book. After all, Erich would never break a promise. He was the type to see things through. So while she waited, she needed to be sure that she’d be able to stand proudly beside him. As if to cheer the lovestruck girl on, her pink earpiece jingled in the wind.

[Tips] Races with strong hunting instincts often fixate on a singular, particularly impressive mark.

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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 2
by Schuld

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